

As you may have gathered over the last few weeks, the Gospel passage we read at Christmas, from the opening of St John's Gospel, has struck a particular resonance with me this year. As I read our Old Testament, Psalm and Gospel for this 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, with their many allusions to light, my mind returned to that Christmas Gospel:

What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *John 1:3-5*

One of the primary themes running through the scriptures is that of light, and the difference between light and darkness. We first see it in the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis:

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. *Gen 1:3-5*

The contrast between light and darkness very much parallels the contrast between good and evil; light is very much of the essence of God. In the vision of the new Jerusalem at the end of the book Revelation:

⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. *Rev 22:5*

Light is very much a sign of God accompanying his people, not only in spectacular manifestations such as the pillar of fire that went before the people in the wilderness by night but also in the experience of the people. In the book of the prophet Micah, the writer confesses, as he reflects on past sin and looks forward to redemption, 'When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.' *Micah 7:8*. There is also a sense in which that light is experienced in reading the word, as the Psalmist confesses:

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. *Ps 119:105*

But there is also the sense in which we are not just to be recipients of light, but also channels of light, ones through whom the light of God shines in the world. The writer of Proverbs declares:

¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what they stumble over. *Proverbs 4:18,19*

This is where the two themes of Epiphany, of light, of mission come together.

¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

As I have said before we are moving towards one of the most crucial elections in the history of this State. The events of this past week, which on the surface point to a failure in political leadership, in fact point to a deeper malaise in our society. The old certainties of the past, of a dominant ecclesiastical structure, the values of a largely rural society holding sway even in our cities, our commercial and business life initially gave way to the confidence and prosperity and apparent freedom of the Celtic Tiger years. All this in itself proved to be built on transitory values. The result is that as a society we are left with a deep sense of insecurity as we have watched previously prosperous business fail, the rate of unemployment grow and emigration become a harsh reality for many families and with it a sense of powerlessness.

In the course of a discussion on the ‘Late, Late Show’ the other night, Olivia O’Leary and other commentators were speaking, in the wake of the events of this last week, of the need for Irish society to re-invent itself; that this crisis in fact represented an opportunity for our society to set a new direction. We need to decide what sort of society we wanted, what steps we were prepared to take to achieve it. It is quite clear, as the election approaches, that the political landscape of this country is changing. This is going to be more than just a rebalancing of the seats held by the existing political parties. We are seeing the emergence of new political groupings that will stand further to the left and the right of what have been basically centrist parties. This in itself is no bad thing but it will

mean that as an electorate we will have to engage in this process in a manner we have not done before. Before very long we will be bombarded through our letter boxes, news paper and television ads, internet postings with election literature from right across the political spectrum. Candidates from right and left and centre are going to offer all manner of solutions to our present crisis. Solutions involve choices and choices involve winners and losers. As Christians, as ones who believe that all our fellow citizens are ones made in the image of God, irrespective of race, culture, gender, age, social standing, we must have a special concern for issues of justice, of human dignity. This will have a bearing on policies to do with health, with education, with employment, with welfare. The time has long passed in our society when the Church set the agenda for social policy and that is no bad thing. Now is the time for the Christian Church in Ireland to express its prophetic role in our society, to ask the difficult questions of right, left and centre, to stand beside those on the margins of our society, so that the Ireland that emerges from this present crisis is a truly just society in which all its children are cherished.

May we be a community through whom the light of Christ shines in our society, a light that the darkness of cynicism, of deception, of distortion, of expediency will never extinguish; that those words from the Book Proverbs might be true of our generation:

¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
which shines brighter and brighter until full day. *Proverb 4:18*