

In our Epistle today, written to the Church in Corinth, a community that would have been steeped in the Greek philosophical tradition, Paul presents contrasts between foolish and wise, weak and strong; between the foolishness of the cross and the wisdom of the wise.

I am reminded that what the world considers wise, what the world considers strong is often illusory. I found myself reflecting on a number of things during the week. I recall one particular visit to Taize in the summer of 1991. Eastern Europeans, now free to travel, were beginning to come to Taize in large numbers. I recall sitting in my small group and hearing first hand some of their experiences. A lady from a Lutheran Church in Leipzig, in what had been East Germany, told of the early prayer meetings in 1989 that overflowed into the street demonstrations that finally lead to the downfall of the East German Government and triggered the whole process that lead to the crumbling of Communist power in Eastern Europe. Small insignificant gatherings of people seen by those who had the power as being of no consequence acting as a catalyst that triggered the downfall of a seemingly all powerful system. In that same week, one of the brothers told our group of a visit he made to a church in a small village in Czechoslovakia shortly after the fall of the communist government. The Parish Priest told him of a small group of faithful parishioners who maintained the worship of the Parish Church all through the Cold War era. Frequently photographed by secret police as they came in and out of Church, often laughed at by others in the village – And then, quite suddenly, the very system that sought to squash their faith, crumbled before their eyes.

Of course as we wander around the immediate area in which we live we come across businesses that have closed down, businesses such as restaurants that have survived having to offer deals that would never have been thought of two or three years ago. Go into town and wander down the Quays towards the Point and we see the shell of what was intended to be luxury offices. Then earlier this week we heard a former Taoiseach complain that he wished someone had told him what was going on in the banks.

As a society we were all caught up in what was going on. We didn't want to hear those such as David McWilliams or George Lee who were beginning to warn that this could not continue. The received wisdom that most of us wanted to hear was that our prosperity was fundamentally secure – there might be peaks and troughs but overall the economy would continue on its upward climb. In Ireland, and in a number of other major economies, the folly of the perceived wisdom, the weakness of the apparent strength of the financial systems have been revealed.

The election is now a matter of weeks away. This week will see the launch of the various campaigns and our radio and television stations are already announcing the various programmes to cover the election and the count itself. As I have remarked over the last couple of weeks we are going to be bombarded with election literature from all sections of the political spectrum, we are going to hear from groups standing further to the left and to the right of our fundamentally centrist main parties. As an electorate we are going to have to engage in this process in a manner we have not done so before. A real duty falls on our media to challenge all parties, to cut through the hype and the spin, so that as an electorate we can be enabled to understand where all parties are standing and then, on the basis of our own personal conviction, whether we stand on the right or the left ourselves, make our own choice in the ballot box in the best interests of our society. All manner of candidates and canvassers will be calling at our doors, handing out leaflets in the street and shopping centres, seeking our votes, seeking to persuade us that they, and the values of the party they represent, offer the best hope for our society.

As I said last week, 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.

But what difference can Christian witness make in what is an increasingly secular society, a society in which, and for which, the Church would seem to be an irrelevance. Whenever we read the passage we read as our Gospel this morning, we can get lost in the detail of the story, when and how did the change in the water take place or even, in some circles in Northern Ireland, was the wine alcoholic or not. I see the message of the story in the overall picture. I see a situation of acute embarrassment for a family. The whole neighbourhood had come to celebrate a wedding and the honour of the family required that they all be entertained and well fed. Then word begins to spread around those who are organising it that the wine is beginning to run out. The Gospel writer tells us that there is something different about that gathering - Jesus and his disciples were there. When I am talking to couples about their wedding, this is one of the readings that is often chosen as a lesson for their wedding service. I often remark that this passage reminds me of the power of the presence of Christ in a situation to transform, to heal even the most awkward and intractable of situations.

We are the Body of Christ. We are the ones, as individuals and as a community, through whom and in whom Christ speaks and acts in the world of today. That is why it is so important for the health of our society that people of Christian conviction get involved in politics; that we bring our Christian conviction to bear in matters of justice, the defence of the poor and the marginalised, on how we choose to cast our vote. It is important that people of Christian conviction get involved at all levels – in voting but also in canvassing, in party organisation and in standing for election itself. Whenever I doubt the power of Christian witness, I think back to those meetings in Taize with Christians from Eastern Europe who maintained their faith and who contributed to the transformation of their society. We live in interesting times – let us not be afraid to play our part.