

One of my memories of living in the Rectory in Ahoghill, is standing in the kitchen, drinking that first cup of coffee of the day, looking out of the window across the valley. On the horizon stands the hill of Slemish. Slemish, the core of a long extinct volcano, is the hill where St Patrick is reputed to have worked as a shepherd. Raiders had captured the young Patrick and he was brought to Ireland where he worked as a slave before eventually escaping back to England.

There is something very contemporary about that story. In our day we would describe him as a migrant, a victim of people traffickers, sold into forced labour. Today, as part of a European Joy Bells initiative originating in Sweden, bells all across Ireland will sound for an hour, beginning at 11:00, ringing out in solidarity with migrants, forced from their homes, victims of traffickers, often facing hostility wherever they go. So on this St Patrick's weekend we think of Patrick the exile, Patrick forced to leave his homeland, Patrick the victim of injustice. As we do so, as the bells ring out, we think of those in our own day forced to leave their homeland, facing hostility, resentment, injustice on the road.

Let us leave that picture of Patrick the exile and turn to our Gospel reading, the story of the woman at the well. It is a long passage; I thought of abbreviating it but to do that would do violence to the text and to the message. It starts in the heat of the day. Jesus is sitting by the well outside the village of Sychar, waiting for the disciples to return from the village. A solitary woman comes out. Let us forget for now the conversation. Why has the woman come out at that time not with the other women of the village when they came out to draw

water? Did she not feel comfortable with them? As the story develops, we discover that this is a woman with a past. She has had a number of partners. Now we begin to see a possible reason for her diffidence about coming out with the other women – the knowing looks, the gossip, the hostile stare. No, maybe it is better to steer clear of them.

Let us go back to this idea of an exile. As I continued to think around this theme of exile, what it means to be an exile, I recalled another class of exile from the history of the Soviet Union in the communist era, that was in itself a hangover from the era of the Czars. There was the internal exile, the likes of the author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a critic of successive Soviet governments, who were forcibly removed from the areas in which they lived and forced to live in isolated regions of the country such as Siberia. They lived as exiles in their own land, cut off from friends and family, just as the woman at the well at Sychar lived as an exile in her own community, cut off by hostile stare, by gossip.

Internal exile; that is something that happens in Russia, in China, in North Korea. That is something terrible that happens in other places. The revelations that have come out in recent times about the Mother and Baby homes should shatter any such complacency. They were our places of internal exile; where those who had offended against our understanding of decency were sent to have their child in secret, from where they returned to communities that did not want to know.

Without condoning for a moment the appalling treatment handed out in some of those homes, scant regard for the emotional wellbeing of the mothers and children, the appalling manner in which the bodies of those who died were treated, I am still left asking, ‘Who sent these young women there?’ It was not just their own parents; it was the gossip, the sideways looks, the hostile stare, the self righteous hypocrisy of the communities in which they lived. And where, of course, were the fathers of these unborn children? I remember in a previous Parish, a mother confiding in me about her son and girl friend expecting a child and the feeling of knowing looks, of people saying nothing. I recall saying to her that her family and their predicament had taken the heat off someone else. In a few weeks they would be old news as the gossips latched on to someone else.

Internal exile; it is not just something that happened in Russia. It is actually not just something that happened in the past, the Mother and Baby homes. In our own State we have refugees in Direct Provision Centres, not for weeks, not for months but in some cases for years. We have families, who have lost their homes, living in bed and breakfast accommodation, pushed from place to place.

I go back to the woman at the well; to the woman in internal exile in her own community; to Jesus in the land of Samaria (where no self respecting Jew would set foot), speaking with a woman, one marked out in her own community as a sinner. We see God in Jesus reaching out across all sorts of barriers. Set alongside these the figure of Patrick, a figure in exile, shortly to escape and return to the land of his exile to spread the Gospel of Christ.

On this Patrick's weekend, we give thanks to God 'who in days of old didst give to this land the benediction of thy holy Church.'

As we reflect on the exiles in our midst, the Mother and Baby homes, the Direct Provision Centres, our treatment of those who have lost their homes, we acknowledge our failure as a society to live up to our Christian calling.

This day we remember the refugees who, having fled injustice and hardship, face further injustice along the road. We remember those in exile; those in exile from their homelands, those who have suffered the consequences of exile within their own lands, within their own communities, in harsh and cruel treatment, in those who kept silent

And so we continue; 'Withdraw not, we pray thee, thy favour from us, but so correct what is amiss, and supply what is lacking, that we may more and more bring forth fruit to thy glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'