

Earlier in the week, I had a message from Ryan, my eldest grandson, obviously in the midst of a school project, asking me what new technologies did I remember from when I was his age, in the early 1960's. I told him of the first satellite sputnik 1, of Yuri Gagarin the first man in space, of Telstar, the first communications satellite.

It was a different world; the era of the Cold War, of superpowers armed with enough nuclear weapons to annihilate each other, only held in check by that fear of mutual annihilation. It seemed that this was how things were going to be far into the future.

In the context of Eastern Europe in the Cold War Era, the communist regimes then in power held total control over the lives of their citizens. That power sought to control and suppress the Church. In 1990, our family was in Taizé the summer after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that had divided the city from 1961. That year, for the first time Christians from many parts of Eastern Europe were allowed to travel freely. They spoke of the amazing changes they had witnessed as power collapsed. One of the Taizé community spoke of a visit to a priest in a village in what is now the Czech Republic. The priest told of how for years he had ministered to a faithful few – only a handful in Church each Sunday. Secret police had harassed his Church members, other villagers had viewed them with a mixture of amusement and hostility. Now, he mused, the power that sought to suppress the Church had collapsed almost overnight. The Church had not only survived but was now beginning to grow.

One example among many of the transitory nature of human power, of the arrogance of human power.

Paul, from whom we read as our Epistle was writing in a period close to the peak of the power of the Roman Empire. Of course Rome was the super-

power of its day, having seen off all its rivals. Paul, in the portion we read from today from the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Church at Corinth, draws a contrast between human power, undoubtedly exemplified by the might of Rome and the powerlessness of the infant Church, the seemingly pointless death of Jesus. At the same time he draws a contrast between the sophistication of Graeco-Roman culture and the ancient philosophers and the seemingly naïve teaching of the Church.

Our passage concludes:

‘For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength..’ (1 Cor 1:25)

The words he chose in the original Greek text bring out this contrast even more sharply than our English translation.

God’s foolishness – the word Paul has used is ‘μωρὸν’ from which we of course derive the word ‘moron’. Moronic has connotations not just of foolishness, but also stupidity. God’s stupidity, the risk of creation, of incarnation; the risk of self giving, self denying, self emptying love is shown to far outweigh the seeming sophistication of much of contemporary wisdom.

God’s weakness – the word Paul uses here is ‘ἀσθενὲς’; it has connotations not just of weakness but also feebleness, verging on the pathetic. In the Gospel accounts of the Passion, Pilate presents the beaten, bleeding Jesus in purple robe and crown of thorns to the crowd, almost goading them ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ There is something darkly comical as the power of Rome makes a cynical point. But of course the influence of that crucified itinerant Galilean preacher has far outlasted the Pilate’s and Caesars of this world.

We are now approaching St Patrick’s Day, a day to give thanks for our Christian heritage, to recall the unique contribution of the Irish Church to the

world wide Church – over the centuries Ireland has been a place of great light, but sadly also of great darkness. At times we have shown wonderful witness and at other times have shown how narrowness and bigotry can distort the Gospel. Jonathan Swift said of his generation ‘we have enough religion to make us hate but not enough to make us love one another.’ The late Terrence O’Neill, in his final broadcast as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, sadly observed; ‘Our religion could have enriched our politics, Instead we have allowed our politics to demean our religion.’

Faith, commitment while passed down from one generation to another, can never be second hand. There is a real sense in which each generation has to make the faith its own, has to express the faith in its own way, has to live out and apply that faith in its own context.

Even apart from Covid 19, the world around us in in a period of uncertainty as many of the certainties of even ten years ago show signs of crumbling. We have the growing power of China economically, technologically, flexing its muscles on the world stage. In the wake of the surreal events of the storming of Congress in Washington on January 6<sup>th</sup>, we have seen signs of instability creeping into the political system in the United States. Closer to home, there is the continuing drama of Brexit and the impact that is having on community tensions in Northern Ireland

All these pose serious questions, for us as a society, for us as individuals. What is to be our guiding light? – the foolishness of God or the foolishness of man. The foolishness of the God who sent his Son, who in his weakness and vulnerability overcame the powers of death and darkness and triumphed on the Cross. The foolishness of men, who think their power, their influence, their interests reign supreme.

Jesu, Jesu, I thee adore – help me love thee more and more.