

Today is observed in Ireland as a National Day of Commemoration, a day of remembering members of the Irish Defence Forces who have given their lives in the service. Remembering will also be of others who have suffered in conflicts in our own land. Remembering can be a funny thing. Different people can remember the same things in different ways.

We read as our Old Testament lesson this morning the account given by the writer of Genesis of the beginnings of a family argument that was to go on for years between Jacob and his brother Esau. Family rows, community rows, international rows are as old as time itself. All this raises the issue of how do we live with difference, difference within families, within communities – differences within Churches.

As I read that story of Jacob and Esau, it occurred to me that this coming Tuesday is the 12th of July and next year will see the centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant – the first of a series of centenaries of significant events in the recent history of this island of Ireland. How will we choose to remember these things? The Ulster Covenant crystallised the opposition of Northern Unionists to passing of the Home Rule Act that would have established a Home Rule Parliament of the whole of Ireland sitting in Dublin. This all triggered two very significant events – the running of guns into Larne, organised by the Northern Unionists and then the arrival of the Asgard here in Howth with guns for the IRB. The ground was laid for the conflict that was to continue on and off for the next hundred years in a society, North and South, that has had difficulty living with difference and with different aspirations, different memories.

Next Tuesday there will be many who will enjoy the parades, the colour, the music, the atmosphere. There will be many who will not be under any direct threat but who will just get out. There will be people on both sides who will have a strong sense of their community being under threat but who will have no corresponding understanding of the fears and grievances of the other community.

I think I may have mentioned this next incident before. One summer, around the time of the prisoner releases that followed on from the Good Friday Agreement, Rachel and I went to a couple of events in the West Belfast Festival, including a guided walk on the Cavehill, which at that stage had not been opened to the public. I fell into step with a man I realised was a former prisoner and we started to chat. He introduced himself to me as Davy and I just introduced myself as Kevin (which was a very safe name in that part of Belfast). I asked where he came from he asked me where I was living and I said Ahoghill. Then he asked me what I did for a living. The answer, 'I'm the Church of Ireland Rector of Ahoghill' was a bit of a conversation stopper. Ahoghill in republican circles was known as a 'Black Loyalist hole'. We then got into a very interesting conversation. He turned out to be a cousin of Gerry Adams and was playing the role of Bobby Sands in a play on the Hunger Strikes, a play we had in fact already booked tickets for. I said that up to that point I had only seen the hunger strikes and the hunger strikers through the eyes of my own community; I felt I had to at least try and also see them through the eyes of the Nationalist community. We both came to the conclusion that peace will only come when both sides accept that both

communities have been traumatised and both are prepared to acknowledge the pain of the other, without trying to say my pain is more valid than your pain.

How do we learn to live with difference? How could Jacob learn to live with Esau and Esau with Jacob in the light of what had gone on between them. How do communities separated by years of mutual suspicion learn to live in peace.

Of course this is not just a problem for Jacob and Esau, or for the divided communities of Northern Ireland. These all raise issues of healing and reconciliation at all levels. We see it in families, tensions between children, in relationships, between different branches of a family. We see it in the class rooms of our schools. I think one of the most valuable lessons to be learned in our schools is in this whole area of living with difference, working through tensions and disagreements

May we, in whatever situation we find ourselves in, whatever memories of hurt are on our minds, go out this week as ones willing to listen to, to understand the hurts of another, that we may be agents of his healing reconciling love in whatever situation God has placed us in.