

⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
⁵saying, ‘When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
⁶buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’ *Amos 8:4-6*

Anyone who drives from the Port Tunnel exit in the Docklands down past the Point Theatre will have noticed a huge slogan painted on a hoarding round a now derelict building site. It reads

‘Greed is the knife and the scars run deep’

I think about this in a week that has seen the former Chairman of Anglo Irish Bank declared bankrupt. There is a tendency, as we emerge from the fog of the decline of the Celtic Tiger, to place all the blame on rogue bankers, irresponsible developers. There can be no denying that these individuals bear huge responsibility but that slogan on the hoarding reminds me of a malaise that runs deeper, that affected us as a society. As things started to fall apart a couple of years ago, several commentators remarked that we had lost the run of ourselves.

As we start to recognise the long term damage, as we contemplate the burden of debt that has been placed on a whole generation to come, it is worth reflecting on what induced the changes in outlook of us as individuals and as a society.

I want to take as our starting point our Old Testament and Gospel readings and thoughts that these particular passages triggered off in my own mind during this last week rather than any deep theological reflection on the text.

We can all get caught up in the busy-ness of life. This needs to be done, that should have been done last week – and things, maybe important things, get put on the back burner. I'll get round to it when I have the time, when I have got this done, finished that project.

This is where I can identify with Martha as Jesus says to her; 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.' The word in the original text that we have translated as 'distracted' speaks of distraction to the point of agitation and distress. Martha is so taken up with the busy-ness of entertaining her guest, she cannot enjoy the presence of her guest. As I reflected on that I recalled words spoken to students for the ministry, when Pope John Paul II visited Maynooth: 'Don't be so busy with the work of the Lord that you forget the Lord of the work.' It is so easy to allow the urgent to displace the important. So easy to happen in family life, as the immediate pressures of work are allowed to displace time that should be spent with family, with children, building and maintaining relationships with those we love. So easy to happen in our spiritual life as time for worship, time just to be quiet, to think, to pray, to read can be crowded out by other preoccupations. As I say, so easy for the urgent, the immediate, to displace the important.

Turning to our Old Testament Lesson, particularly the passage I took as my text:

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This is more than just the urgent displacing the important. This is where values have changed. There is still an outward respect for the traditions of new moon and Sabbath.

But they are now seen not in terms of setting the agenda, setting the tone for the conduct of daily life; they are now seen as an intrusion into the ‘real life’ of business and commerce. The religious and spiritual traditions that shaped a community are no longer at the centre, they are to be fitted around, and even adjusted to suit, what have now become the real priorities of that society, the pursuit of business, the accumulation of wealth.

None of us who can recall the poverty of the Ireland of the 1980’s and before, who can remember the derelict buildings that lined the Liffey all the way down to the Point Theatre can deny that the early years of the Celtic Tiger brought real hope and confidence to this country. I recall talking with friends who had children the same age as our own remarking of the 1980’s, ‘We thought we were breeding our children for emigration.’ It was not all bad. We have seen massive improvements to our infrastructure; the influx of foreign nationals have made us a more inclusive and tolerant society. But something went wrong as the wealth and prosperity that brought us undeniable benefits began to change us. Values and priorities began to change – not only at corporate level but also at personal level. We became a more driven society. I recall one conversation I had about a year ago with a man running his own business. I asked him how he was being affected. He said, ‘There is less work out there so I find I am getting home at 6 rather than 8 – which actually means I am now spending more time with my family – which is good.’ As it has been said ‘We lost the run of ourselves’ and individuals and families and communities are picking up the pieces. For several years to come our health and community services, our education system, small and medium size businesses are going to be paying the cost of bailing out elements of our banking sector.

I go back to that slogan on the hoarding in the docklands; ‘Greed is the knife and the scars run deep.’ In time business will pick up; prosperity will return. The question remains, will we as individuals and as a society learn from the scars left by the excesses of the Celtic Tiger; that there are assets more valuable than anything that appear on a

profit and loss account, the values and priorities that shape us as a society. The Church needs to rediscover its prophetic role and not be afraid to proclaim its own distinctive Gospel values, to challenge and inform the Ireland it is called to serve in the name of Christ.

Almighty and merciful God,
who in days of old didst give to this land the benediction of thy holy Church;
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.

Amen