

The other night, after I got back to the house, I switched on the television and came in towards the end of a programme in the series ‘Who do you think you are?’ The particular lady in question was the actress Una Stubbs, who I remember as Alf Garnett’s daughter in the TV sitcom ‘Till death us do part’. She was trying to find out information about her grandfather, Sir Ebenezer Howard who, at the beginning of the last century, had been a pioneer in the ‘Garden City Movement’ in England and had been one of the founders of Welwyn Garden City. As the tale unfolded, we discovered that he had been born in the cramped streets of East London, with its poor sanitation, poor educational and social facilities that had stunted the lives of so many who had grown up there. In his idealism, for he earned very little from his life long project, he was supported by a very practical wife who kept some semblance of order on the family finances. At the end of the programme, Una Stubbs speaks of a greater understanding of who she was as a person.

Over the years I have had many calls on my door from those wanting to look at Parish Registers, trying to find a date and place of birth, marriage or death of someone in their family background. They will often liken it to piecing together a jigsaw. Another term that is often used would be that of ‘trying to find their roots’. One American lady who visited me discovered that her great great grandfather had died in the Work House in Mountmellick around the time of the Famine which provided a context for his family emigrating to America at that time.

All this talk of looking for roots, of trying to understand who we are, came to my mind as I read the opening of the portion from the Letter to the Colossians that we read from this morning as it speaks of being rooted and built up in Christ. Now to anyone who does any gardening, roots are very much part and parcel of things. It is from the roots that the plant derives water, nutrition from the soil. Roots will often run deep – as anyone trying to rid a garden of

bramble, thistles or bindweed knows only too well. Or if you leave a plant in a small pot for too long the roots become entangled and the plant soon begins to wither. When you are transplanting, it is vital that the roots are treated with care, that good provision is made in the form of compost or other suitable material for the roots to strike into.

With these horticultural thoughts in mind, let us return to our lesson from the letter to the Colossians and some of the other references to roots in the New Testament.

Like the bind weed and bramble there are bad roots that run deep in life and can be hard to eradicate. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews enjoins his readers: ‘Pursue peace with everyone ..’ and then warns:

¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. *Hebrews 12:15*

That root of bitterness, so hard to eradicate and so easily fed, can poison communities, individuals, churches. We are only too aware of the results of sectarianism and of racialism, that can all too easily be stoked up by those with ulterior motives both on this island and further afield.

The writer of the 1st Letter to Timothy warns of that other root that can so easily distort our judgement and our values.

¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. *1 Timothy 6:10*

One of the less pleasant aspects of the Tiger Years was the materialism that crept into so many aspects of our national life; in which image and possessions, the clothes we wore, the car we drove, the house we lived in were allowed to define us rather than our value as people, as individuals in our own right.

Good roots, bad roots – we also read of no roots. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells a story of the farmer sowing his seed, along the path, on rocky ground, among thorns and on good soil. The seed sown on the rocky ground endures a fate that will have been very familiar to us in recent weeks as we have watched roadside grass scorched in the heat. He explains to his hearers:

²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. *Matthew 13:20-21*

This for me speaks of the need of establishing values by which we live, principles on which we are going to base our lives. This brings me to the passage we read today and a similar one in the Letter to the Ephesians which I have included in a text box on our lesson sheet.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. *Colossians 2:6-7*

¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. *Ephesians 3:16-17*

They both speak of roots, they both speak of the soil into which those roots are to run down into.

Rooted and built up in Christ
Rooted and grounded in love.

I began by talking of people, as they trace their family history, trying to find their roots. Part of this is seeking a sense of identity – but I would sense more than this – there is a seeking a sense of belonging. So when I talk of myself as

seeking to be rooted in Christ, rooted in love I am saying ‘This is where I belong; this is where I find meaning and purpose and direction in life.’ The words in the letters are addressed not to individuals but to a community. We encounter Christ in word, in prayer but also in one another as we discover what it is to belong to Christ, to belong to one another.

It is out of that sense of belonging that I come to God in prayer. When the disciples came to Jesus with the request ‘Lord, teach us to pray’, he gave them a simple model of prayer that forms the basis of the Lord’s Prayer that we use in all our services. He taught them to address God as Father, as Abba, not as a stranger but one to whom we can relate; as one who knows our deepest thoughts, our deepest needs; as one who hears, who understands, who responds, one to whom I truly belong, one in whom I truly live and move and have my being.