

In the house of the Archbishop of Dublin in Milltown there is a table that came from Downing Street. In the centre there is a plaque with the inscription, ‘Around this table Gladstone and his associates plotted the destruction of the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Ireland’. The plot that is referred to is the process that culminated in the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1871. Prior to that date, as part of the United Church of England and Ireland, the Church of Ireland as the Established Church held a power and influence quite disproportionate to our numbers. At Disestablishment the Church was stripped of all vestiges of political power as well as much of its wealth. Assemblies College in Belfast and Maynooth College, among others benefited from the redistribution of wealth. We were allowed to keep our Church buildings but the Church had to buy back its Rectories from the Government. Within a very short period of time the Church of Ireland had to learn a new way of being Church in a rapidly changing Ireland that was within fifty years to experience full scale revolution and civil war.

Far from leading to the destruction of the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Ireland, the Church, now free from the constraints of Parliamentary oversight, pioneered the whole concept of Synodical government in the Anglican Communion with the involvement of the laity at all levels of Church administration from Select Vestries through to the General Synod and the appointment of clergy and Bishops.

The loss of secular power and influence was in fact a liberation as the Church was thrown back on its fundamental role in society of witnessing to and proclaiming the Gospel. From the time of the Emperor Constantine, when the

Church found itself moving from a position of being persecuted to one of privilege in the Empire, the Christian Church has always had a problem in finding the balance between living in the world but not being of the world, in resisting the temptation to get caught up by the power and influence of the world. When we go to Taize, we camp in Cluny within sight of the ruins of the great Abbey of the monastery. That monastery was founded by Bernard of Clairvaux as a centre of reform and renewal of the monastic movement in the Middle Ages. It became in its latter days a place of great wealth and was destroyed in the wake of the French Revolution. All that now remains of the once magnificent basilica is one of the great towers we can see from our campsite and the remains of a few walls now incorporated into houses in the town centre.

Time and time again, right up to the present day, the Church has had to learn the futility of standing on dignity, of seeking status and privilege in the society it is called to serve in the name of Christ. Time and time again the fundamental witness of the Church has been compromised by its failure to learn that fundamental truth. In the process the people, often the most vulnerable, have been hurt and the love of God hidden behind a veil of human pride. There is something in our human nature that finds this very difficult. Even among the first disciples there was clearly evidence of a jockeying for position. In St Luke's Gospel we read of Jesus teaching his disciples:

But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. *Luke 22:25ff*

‘I am among you as one who serves’ - and we are called to do the same. The position of the servant is one who offers service, who is available. The passage we read as our Gospel reading this morning, the feeding of the five thousand takes this last point of availability one stage further. The story as told to us is not one of manna dropping out of the sky, the feeding begins with a comparison between the very meagre supplies the disciples can come up with and the massive need of a hungry crowd. It is a story of God working with what is available, in all its inadequacy, to fulfil his purposes.

What is available to God to fulfil his purposes in the world of today, in this particular community in which we are set? The short answer is you and me. We are the ones through whom God chooses to act in the world of today. Our effectiveness rests not on any particular talent or strength but on our willingness to be used, the degree to which we are prepared to offer that talent or strength in the service of others. On occasion God can work most effectively through what we may see as our weakness. Paul reflects on this in his 2nd Letter to the Church at Corinth, a Church that would seem to have laid great store on outward signs of effectiveness:

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

2 Cor 12:7ff

Power is made perfect in weakness.

We began by thinking of the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland back in 1871. To many in the Church at the time, the plot that was hatched in Downing Street spelled the end of the Church of Ireland as they knew it. Robbed of the wealth and influence that seemed to be essential to its life and mission, the Church was left with what seemed to be the equivalent of a few loaves and fishes with which to do its work. But in the process the Church experienced a renewal in its life and worship that better equipped it for ministry in a rapidly changing political and social environment.

In our own day we are witnessing what almost amounts to a disestablishment of the Church in Ireland with all the pain and the trauma that goes with that. The tenor of the Taoiseach's speech in Dail Eireann marked a turning point in the relationship between Church and State in modern Ireland, a time when Ireland moved closer to becoming the Republic it aspires to be. The Letters Page in the Irish Times demonstrates the turmoil of emotions among people and clergy as they come to terms with what has happened in the past. This is no occasion for any pride or triumphalism on our part for our own history is not without blemish. It is a salutary reminder that the effectiveness of the Church lies not in vestiges of power and prestige in the eyes of the world but in faithfulness to him who said, 'I am among you as one who serves.'

May God take the inadequacy of the loaves and fishes of service we offer. May he empower them with his Holy Spirit and use them for the advancement of his Kingdom in the world of today to the honour and glory of his name. May we be content to be simply the hands, the feet, the lips of Christ in the world of today.