

In recent weeks we have seen a recurrence of violence surrounding parades in Belfast that all had hoped was slipping into the past. What troubled me more than the actual violence, that could have been attributed to a mindless extreme, were some of the comments made by senior political figures. They would have obviously felt that they had the support of at least a significant proportion of their support. These events and the accompanying comments bear witness to tensions simmering beneath the surface as Northern Ireland braces itself for the first of the big centenaries that will be coming up over the next ten years, that of the signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant. Just as the Covenant was in its own day, so these recent events are signs of a still polarised society. But not only that it demonstrates the inherent instability of a polarised society.

Of course it is easy for us in the comfort of this beautiful part of the world to look askance at societies such as Northern Ireland and to ignore the problems of polarities and inequalities that lie on our own doorstep, that left unattended could have a destabilising effect on our own society. There are a number of polarities, maybe less obvious but deep seated none the less, in our own society.

In the wake of the demise of the Celtic Tiger, we have an increasing polarity between rich and poor in our society. Vincent de Paul, Protestant Aid, Focus Ireland all speak of more appeals for help. Those who feel they missed out on the benefits of the Celtic Tiger are expressing a growing frustration and anger in the face of the cut backs and with it the perception that those who caused the collapse seem to be escaping the hardship that it has brought. This has

manifested itself in the large ‘No’ vote in the recent EU referendum in working class areas and probably contributed to the significant vote for Sinn Fein in the recent presidential election in those same areas. Many people have expressed some surprise at the absence of serious unrest on our streets in the face of the cut backs demanded as part of the EU/IMF bailout process.

There is a polarity between the powerful and the weak in our society. The continuing revelations concerning child abuse have demonstrated how a powerful institution can for a while exercise power unchecked, as the reputation of the institution takes precedence over addressing wrongs inflicted on the weak – but the sense of injustice has now come to the surface.

The demonstrations outside Dail Eireann in the face of suggested cutbacks by the HSE of homecare packages for the elderly and the disabled, of possible cuts in the mental health budget to make up for shortfalls elsewhere, while leaving more powerful groupings untouched says something about our society. It is not simply a comment on the nature of the judgements that have been made. It is actually a comment on what is presumed our society will tolerate – that it is preferable for powerful groups, be they senior professionals or public service groupings, to be left unchallenged rather than protect the resources on which the services to the weak and the marginalised depend. I recall, back in the 1980’s, coming to the conclusion that there were no votes in mental handicap or care of the elderly.

The portion appointed for our Epistle, from the Letter of James, is clearly addressing a community that itself contains within it a wide range of social and

economic groupings. The rich and the powerful are not being told to abandon their wealth. What they are being told to do is to change their attitudes, their attitude to their wealth, their attitude to other people. He refers to the ‘royal law’, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, that places the person before us at the centre of our attention. The passage as a whole is keenly aware of how wealth, how class can be divisive in the life of the life of the community. What we are talking about here is an example of the polarities, and their potential to destabilise a community, that we see in contemporary society that I was reflecting on earlier.

Ireland, both North and South, faces real challenges in the months that lie ahead. The temptation is to retreat into our own social and economic groupings and interest groups but history surely teaches us the dangers of instability and division that lie along that road. The gospel challenges us to look beyond the barriers that others would seek to define us by, be they wealth, class, race, creed, gender or whatever and recognise a common humanity, that we should love one another as God in Christ has loved each one of us.