

Do you remember where you were on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1972 and the days that immediately followed? I was living in rooms in Trinity. I recall the atmosphere in the centre of Dublin in those days that followed Bloody Sunday, as it came to be called. With my English accent I felt the need to be cautious about who I spoke to. On the day of the funerals, friends invited me to spend the day with them down in Killiney. There was a palpable sense of outrage with the daily demonstrations at the British Embassy in Merrion Square. I returned to College that evening and passed the now smoking ruins of the British Embassy. It was almost as if a boil had been lanced that day; the atmosphere in the city noticeably calmed the following day.

There was an ongoing sense of injustice in Nationalist circles that was only fuelled by the subsequent, now discredited, Widgery Report. A sense of injustice that was to simmer right up to the present day, a sense of injustice that gave credence to those who argued that the only way to redress the grievances of the Nationalist community was that of armed struggle, that undermined those who argued the path of peaceful protest and political engagement. That year, 1972, proved to be the most bloody of the Troubles.

The publication of the Saville Report, the response of the British Government and the reaction of the crowds in Guildhall Square in Derry to the report and the words of David Cameron in the House of Commons all represented a unique moment in the history of these islands. It was almost as if one of the demons of the past had been cast out.

As it turns out, our Gospel reading this morning is that somewhat perplexing account of the casting out of the demons into the herd of Gaderene swine. I want to ignore the fate of the pigs for today and just reflect on the reaction of the people of the town. When they saw the previously demon possessed man sitting calmly at Jesus' feet, they were confused and asked Jesus to leave the area. In a strange way they could cope with the man when he was running naked and demented around the graveyard outside the village. He actually did not impinge on their lives. The man healed, and the manner of his healing, caused

them more problems. They now had to relate to a man they had previously at the very least ignored or maybe viewed with a mixture of fear, contempt or pity. In a very real sense while the man who was healed had been delivered of his demons, the people of the town were still under the power of fear, of mistrust, of prejudice – they, if you like, had yet to be delivered. This is actually brought out rather nicely in the rendition of our Gospel reading in the ‘Message’ translation, part of which I have inserted in the lesson sheet;

Then those who had seen it happen told how the demoniac had been saved. Later, a great many people from the Gerasene countryside got together and asked Jesus to leave—too much change, too fast, and they were scared. So Jesus got back in the boat and set off. *Luke 8:36-37 ‘The Message’*

With this idea of one man delivered and a community yet to be delivered, let us return to the events of this week. Alongside the very positive reactions to the Saville Report there were some more negative reactions from some senior DUP politicians, arguing that a hierarchy of suffering was being established. It is tempting from the security of our polite Dublin suburb to simply dismiss this as the sectarian rantings of embittered politicians. We must not forget that Northern Ireland is still a deeply wounded society. I would have no doubt that as the report of the Saville Enquiry was released in Derry and London there were many families in Northern Ireland for whom that day was painful as they recalled the loss of their own loved ones; they have received no explanation and no apology from those who were involved. I say this not in any way to minimise the impact of Bloody Sunday on Northern Ireland. The fact that it involved the armed forces of the State, that the victims, now found to be totally innocent, had been found by the Widgery Tribunal to have contributed to their own deaths, was indeed in the words of Lord Saville ‘unjustified and unjustifiable’. Bloody Sunday was indeed a tragedy for the victims and their families and a disaster for Northern Ireland. That truth had to be stated, that demon had to be exorcised.

But there are other truths that have to be heard. I recall, shortly after the prisoners were released from the H-Blocks, Rachel and I took part in a walk on the Cave Hill overlooking Belfast, organised by the West Belfast Festival. We were also planning to go to a play on

the Hunger Strikes later in the week. On the walk I happened to fall in step with a man who I soon realised was a former Republican prisoner who, as it turned out, was playing the part of Bobby Sands in the play. Just as I had not expected to meet him, he had not expected to find himself talking to the Rector of Ahoghill, certainly not in the context of the West Belfast Festival – my Christian name Kevin had maybe initially put him off the scent. (In republican circles Ahoghill was known rather unfairly as a ‘black loyalist hole’) I told him that I was looking forward to the play because up to then I had only seen the Hunger Strikes through the eyes of my own community – I felt I had to be prepared to see them through the eyes of the Nationalist community. In the course of the conversation that followed we both agreed that peace will come when each side is prepared to listen to and to understand not only its own pain but the pain of the other.

This in turn represents a recognition of our common humanity before God, as ones each made in the image of God; a profound acceptance of the truth of Paul’s declaration to the Galatians that we read in our Epistle:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ..... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. *Galatians 3:27-28*

The events in Derry and London this last week marked a vital step on that road towards healing, but the healing must continue if this island of Ireland is to know a true and lasting peace. For that healing to continue, truth, all truth, must be heard if the demons of the past are to be exorcised, that the truth may truly set us free.