

This last ten days we have seen every parents nightmare across our papers and television screens. The J1 visa has become something of a rite of passage for Irish college students down through the years with its opportunities to work and travel in America. Then in the midst of a 21st Birthday party in Berkley, as they celebrated with friends, as a balcony plunged down into the street below, 6 lives were cut short and others scarred physically and mentally for life.

All this week, we have watched hearses leaving Dublin Airport, coffins carried into Church way before their time, friends and family consoling each other. We are left asking that unanswerable question, ‘Why?’ Even in the absence of answers, we still ask, we still search for meaning; meaning of life, meaning of death.

In a thought provoking piece in the ‘Irish Times’ on Wednesday, Kathy Sheridan wrote out of her self confessed cynicism of the Church:

“The ‘J-1’ will never sound the same again,” said a wistful young woman outside the church in UCD at last Friday’s memorial service for the students who died. She was last in a church for a wedding 12 months ago, she said. Last time for me was for a funeral, I said.

No doubt most of the 500 or so people gathered in that oasis of peace and contemplation would have said the same. College chaplain Fr Leon Ó Giolláin acknowledged as much when he addressed us as “believers or non-believers, Christians or other . . .”

And yet we were here, non-believers and other, in a church, dabbing away tears, finding release in the heartfelt prayers of students, in the stirring Irish laments on cello and piano, in a gloriously sung Pie Jesu and the beautiful old Celtic blessing: “Deep peace of the gentle night to you/Moon and stars pour their healing light on you . . . Deep peace of Christ to you.”

We were the same people who only a few weeks ago had nodded balefully at Archbishop Diarmuid Martin when, after the marriage equality referendum, he conceded that the church needed to do a reality check and

ask itself had it “drifted away completely from young people”. Bit late for that, we said, pleased we had put an ocean of clear blue water between them and us.

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Hour upon heartsick hour, we heard of Masses, vigils, prayer services and tree-planting in church grounds, all attended by vast numbers of young people finding solace, connection and meaning in old rituals.

And hour upon hour, we found ourselves listening to the words of bishops, chaplains and priests, in all their weary helplessness, listening to people who a few weeks ago seemed about as relevant as snowploughs in the Sahara.

Is it only because it happened a continent away that we noticed how the church remains so deeply entwined with us in our times of sorrow, that it became almost an emblem of our nationhood and connectedness, like the beloved Aer Lingus planes that flew our children home?

Observing the rituals of these weeks and many other weeks, it seems there is something there that speaks to us in times of trial and of joy.

Kathy Sheridan – Irish Times Wed 24th

She speaks of something deep with in ourselves that reaches out beyond the limits of our comprehension. It is as times such as this that I find myself turning more and more to the Old Testament. To the Book Job, as he works through his own pain and loss, rejecting the trite answers of well meaning friends, in which nothing is held back, almost swearing at God. To the Psalms, those wonderful hymns of praise and prayer, lament and complaint, in which we find incredible joy, pain, despair, profound questioning of God. And it is as the pain, the anger, the despair is expressed (let’s face it, God knows how we feel anyway) that light and hope begin to shine through.

And so our psalm this morning begins:

- 1 Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;
Lord, | hear my | voice; @
let your ears consider well the | voice ~ of my | suppli|cation.

Out of the depths, out of the darkness of regrets, of deep and searing loss, our cry goes up to God. God hears our cry, feels our pain, and walks alongside us on the road. And the Church in all its imperfection is called to be a community

within which those life searing questions can be asked, the presence of God experienced.

And so Kathy Sheridan acknowledged: ‘Observing the rituals of these weeks and many other weeks, it seems there is something there that speaks to us in times of trial and of joy.’ She also wrote last Wednesday:

The received wisdom is that most young people don’t know what the inside of a church looks like any more. But the full truth about ourselves as a nation remains somewhere beyond that.

For example, a poll for The Irish Times about family values conducted by Ipsos MRBI in March, suggests that people under 35 – our young people – are the most likely to have their children baptised. And that 95 per cent of them have done so.

Why? Some are hypocrites, of course. If you believe they are all hypocrites, however, then you risk patronising vast numbers of your fellow citizens

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Of course it is easy, isn’t it, when we hear of a funeral of someone we have never seen, a baptism for a family we have never heard of, to bring out the well rehearsed diatribe against ‘four wheel Christians’ and indignantly complain ‘they know where we are when they hit trouble.’

Whenever I feel these thoughts bubbling beneath the surface, I recall the words of the late Archbishop William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury for a tragically short period of two years during the Second World War, in which he said that the Church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of those outside its membership. We are there for those on the outside who are seeking, who are searching, who are hurting. It is part of our vocation as members of the Body of Christ in this place to be the hands and feet and lips of Christ in the places and situations God has placed us.

With these thoughts in mind, I want to turn to our Gospel reading for today, and in particular, the healing of the woman with a haemorrhage, that is almost introduced in the form of an aside to the raising of Jairus’ daughter. There are two key characters in this sub plot, Jesus and the woman herself.. Jesus is a man on a mission; he has been called to the house of Jairus. The woman should not be where she is. Her haemorrhage renders her unclean, anyone touching her would be similarly affected so she is risking at the very least the

hostility of those around her. And so in the midst of that crowd she is alone. She had tried all the doctors in town to no avail. Perhaps, just perhaps, ‘if I can but touch the hem of his garment.’ It works, we are told she is healed – but she has been noticed. Jesus, we are told felt power coming out of him and he asks who touched him. In the midst of his busyness, in the midst of the crush he is aware of her and there is something about him that makes her want to share her story of sickness, of disappointed hopes, of desperation. And she hears words of healing, of peace.

If I can but touch the hem of his garment. In that environment, in the heat, the garment was loose fitting – she could touch without getting too close. I was at a conference last year addressed by the retired Bishop of Lincoln. Reflecting on this passage, he asked of the Church ‘How wide is the hem of our garment?’ How easy is it for those on the outside of our fellowship to draw near? Are we perceived by those on the outside as intolerant? Are we seen as wrapping the garment of our doctrinal purity tightly around us lest we be soiled by the world? Does the stranger find a welcome? How do those who have been hurt by life, by society, perhaps by the Church experience us – do they find in us words of welcome, of healing, of peace – or what?

They know where we are when they hit trouble – do those who are hurting, do those on the margins know we are here? Here not just to offer a grudging accommodation for the funeral of one they have loved, but here to stand alongside them in their hurt or their pain, here to bring something of the peace and presence of Christ.

As Kathy Sheridan wrote this week: ‘Observing the rituals of these weeks and many other weeks, it seems there is something there that speaks to us in times of trial and of joy.’ How wide is the hem of our garment? How wide is our welcome? Can we be the ones in whom and through whom God continues to speak to this broken and hurting world in all its joys and its sorrows.

As much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.