

Earlier this week I was watching the review of the papers on the BBC News channel before heading off to bed. It was the day before the statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. One paper had a picture of Jeremy Hunt dressed as a doctor with the caption, ‘This is going to hurt.’

My mind went back to the 1990’s and the words of one of Jeremy Hunt’s predecessors, Norman Lamont. In the course of bringing inflation down he had raised interest rates on a number of occasions. One of the consequences of this had been a rise in the rate of unemployment along with a rise in mortgage rates.

When asked to comment on this in the House of Commons, he gave a reply that was to haunt him and the Government for the rest of their time in office – ‘If it isn’t hurting, it isn’t working.’ It left the impression that the Chancellor and the Government were indifferent to the pain caused by unemployment and rising mortgage costs.

Those words, ‘If it isn’t hurting, it isn’t working.’ Came to my mind as I read the Gospel passage appointed for today. In that context these words speak not of indifference but of the total commitment and self-giving of Jesus.

Over the last twelve months as our lectionary has followed the third of the three year cycle of readings, our Gospel readings have been drawn mainly from St Luke’s Gospel. St Luke presents us with a picture of a developing conflict. Initially, Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing had met with popular acclaim. But from the day that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, our Lord faced steadily increasing opposition from the rulers and religious leaders. That

opposition stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding on their part regarding the nature of Jesus' ministry.

This was a time of heightened expectation; many were expecting the imminent arrival of God's Messiah. But the Messiah they expected was a very different figure to what they saw in the ministry of Jesus. They were expecting a strong national leader who would stand up to the Romans, one who would uphold the traditions handed down to them. They were not ready for an itinerant preacher who seemed set to undermine everything they stood for. And so, in our Gospel readings for the last few Sundays the conflict has grown sharper, reaching its climax in our Gospel passage for today. We read of Jesus crucified, derided by leaders, by soldiers, even by one of those crucified with him.

Take for example the taunts of the rulers:

‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ *Luke 23:35*

But of course, that is the very point. To have saved himself would have been a denial of the very heart of his ministry. It is precisely because he is the Christ of God that he is where he is. There is a tapestry on the wall of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Monkstown that sums this up beautifully: ‘It was not nails that held him to the cross – it was love.’ As he reminded his disciples earlier in his ministry: ‘The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Today, this Sunday before Advent, our minds focus on the Kingship of Christ. When we think of Kingship in the context of the ancient world, we tend to

think in terms of pomp and power; a king as someone who commands, who dominates.

This of course is what lies behind the jeers of the soldiers, standing guard at the foot of the cross. To these men, soldiers of a powerful Empire, Jesus would have cut a rather pathetic figure. On the cross was written, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ Some King. Yet there was something different about this man. His bearing was different. He did not come to the Cross defiant. But neither did he cringe, begging for mercy. What did he say as they drove the nails home?

‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’
Luke 23:34

Strange man. But then all the people in this awful place were strange.

Then there was the first of the two criminals crucified with him. In the midst of his pain, his fear and desolation, he too hurls abuse at the poor character hanging beside him. Crucifixion was a punishment reserved for those who were deemed to be a threat to Roman rule, to set an example to any others who might think of doing the same. Very possibly he would have been involved in armed revolt. In which case he would have had very little time for Jesus’ peaceful approach. So maybe there is a hint of contempt in his words:

‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ *Luke 23:39*

Again, he misses the point. It is precisely because he is the Christ that he cannot save himself.

Paul expresses this beautifully in his letter to the Philippians, as he speaks of Jesus as one;

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. *Philippians 2:6-11*

It falls to the second criminal to recognise in Jesus something of a King.

‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ *Luke 23:42*

He was the one, not those learned in religion, not those who wielded power in the world who came to recognise majesty in the one crowned with thorns, authority in hands pierced by cruel nails.

We are, as I said earlier, about to enter the Season of Advent. This is a season of preparation to celebrate the Festival of Christmas, a festival of the first coming of Jesus in humility. It is also a season of anticipation as we think of his coming again in glory.

Today our minds focus on the King we prepare to welcome. As I read the Gospel reading appointed for today, I am reminded of the nature of his kingship and the values of his Kingdom. I am reminded very forcefully that

the values and priorities of the Kingdom of God do not sit easily with the values of this world. As I pray ‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done’, I realise that I am called to bring the values of the Kingdom to bear of the world in which I live, in my home, in my street, in my place of business and recreation. My life, my attitudes, my priorities should be a sign of him in this world

Human traditions, political power, on which we base so much trust, are but transitory. Our ultimate security, our ultimate hope rests on our response to his values of forgiveness, his promises of redemption, his call to discipleship.