

Ireland has been described in the past as ‘an island of saints and scholars’. This is a reflection of our rich spiritual heritage, the unique role of the Celtic Church as a centre of Christian learning and missionary outreach in the early Medieval period. That image has been tarnished in recent years by ongoing sectarian conflict in the North of Ireland and by the various scandals that have hit the Church in the Republic. There is no doubt that both of these have had a serious impact on the mission of the Church that will probably take years to reverse. Having said that, I think that the vast majority of people living on this island would still want to characterise Ireland as a Christian country.

God, and the things of God, are still very much part of our social fabric. There are still a large number of Church buildings in regular use, as places of worship, as places where a community gathers to celebrate the great stages in human life, of birth, of marriage, of death. The Angelus, ringing out at 12 and 6 from Church buildings and on radio and television provides an opportunity to pause in the midst of a hectic world. Our legal system has its roots in our Judaeo-Christian heritage; many of our fundamental laws have their roots in the laws and teachings of the bible. Even the language we use in daily life, ‘God help you’, ‘God bless you’ displays the influence of our cultural and spiritual heritage. And still those with little Church attachment seek baptism for their children. In these days of civil partnerships, the possibility of getting married in a variety of venues, a surprising number still want to express their lifelong commitment to each other in the context of Christian marriage. Then, at the end of life, people still find comfort and peace in a religious ceremony for the funeral of a loved one.

God, the things of God – still very much part of our social fabric. These thoughts occurred to me as I read over the portion appointed as our Epistle for today from Paul's letter to the Church at Rome.

‘The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart’

What Paul is referring to here is the faith that is proclaimed and a life that is imbued with faith, a faith that runs through life. Then the thought occurred to me how do we experience the presence of God in the world of today. For me my spiritual journey began in a sense of wonder in the world about me. As a young boy I had had an interest in nature, in the amazing variety of the world about me. It was my physics teacher in School and my lecturers in Trinity who encouraged me to explore the meaning behind it all and over a period wonder evolved into worship. In this regard the words of psalm 8 have had a particular resonance for me:

- 4 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, ♦
the moon and the stars that you have ordained,
- 5 What are mortals, that you should be mindful of them; ♦
mere human beings, that you should seek them out? *Ps 8*

There is a sense of wonder, of the otherness, of the majesty of God. But that sense of wonder in itself does not do justice to the God addressed in that psalm. The psalm speaks in terms of a personal encounter, of a God who cares, who seeks.

Another important memory for me is of lying in a hospital bed with a broken leg and a lady from the local Parish Church calling by to visit. I don't remember anything that was said – there was certainly no preaching – we

chatted and she left behind a Parish Magazine. I do recall being impressed as to why someone would do that sort of thing – what Stephen, our Youth Worker, would call indiscriminate acts of kindness. We can experience God in other people. In the simple acts of love and kindness of another, God can break through into my life.

Of course this is a two way business. If, in my brokenness, I can experience God breaking through, I can also encounter God in the brokenness of others.

Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, a priest of the Church of Ireland, served as a chaplain in the trenches of the First World War. During that time he earned the nick-name ‘Woodbine Willie’ from the packet of Woodbines that were brought out of his pocket as he came up to soldiers in the line; a simple act of kindness that opened up possibilities of deeper conversations. After the war he was appalled at the sight of ex-servicemen, bearing scars in body and mind from the trenches, left to beg on the street. He abhorred the manner in which a society that saw itself as Christian could turn its back on the Christ they met in their own streets. He wrote the poem ‘Indifference’:

When Jesus came to Golgatha,
They hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet,
And made a Calvary.
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns,
Red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days,
And human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham
They simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him,
They only let Him die;

For men have grown more tender,
And they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street,
And left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them,
For they know not what they do!
And still it rained the winter rain
That drenched Him through and through;
The crowd went home and left the streets
Without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall
And cried for Calvary.

‘When Lord did we see you hungry when did we see you naked
when did we see you sick, in prison, homeless?’

‘As much as you did it to the least of these my brothers you did it to me.’

‘As much as you did not do it to the least of these my brothers you did not do it
to me’.

We began by reflecting on how we experience God, ways in which we perceive his presence in the world. We have ended up reflecting on a different question, how can others experience God in us. The question ‘How can I experience God?’ can all too easily drift into a spiritual self-indulgence. The question ‘How can others experience God in us?’ leads us into questions of discipleship, of service - of simply making ourselves available in the name of Christ to those who need our help.

May God open our hearts and minds this week that we might be instruments of his presence in the life of another.