

On the Thursday of this last week there was the Feast of the Transfiguration. That day also marked the 75th Anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Thousands of people died on the day itself and thousands more died in the aftermath of radiation poisoning. Hiroshima has cast its own particular cloud ever since. Global politics, and in particular the Cold War that determined international relations for the remainder of the 20th century and which shows signs of recurring again, all existed under that cloud, the threat of large scale annihilation in the event of a nuclear war. The peace that has held since that fateful day in 1945 was based on fear and mistrust.

This week also saw the death of John Hume, former leader of the SDLP, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize alongside David Trimble and acknowledged by former friends and political adversaries as one of the crucial figures in the history of Ireland in the 20th Century.

So instead of reading the Gospel reading appointed for this weekend, I am using the account given to us by the writer of Mark's Gospel of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

In our reading from Mark's Gospel this morning we are presented with a picture of a particular experience the disciples had of Jesus in which they saw him in a way they had never seen him before; in which they were presented with a vision of Jesus as he truly was; a great teacher but more than that – one who they could only describe in terms of Incarnation, God present and living among them, the Son of God.

I've said in the past that the Resurrection of Jesus was more than just something that happened to Jesus, it was something that happened to the disciples. If we are to make sense of Transfiguration we have to see this as not just something that happened to Jesus – it was something that happened to them.

Just to set us thinking about what I am trying to get across, I turn to that hymn, 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord', and in particular the 4th verse:

4 In the beauty of the lilies,
Christ was born across the sea,
with a glory in his bosom
that transfigures you and me.
As he died to make men holy,
let us live to make men free,
our God is marching on.

'with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me'. Going back to our Gospel reading, the word in the Greek text that we translate as 'he was transfigured' is μετεμορφώθη, from which we derive our word 'metamorphosis'. This is the word we use to describe the process by which a caterpillar, forms a cocoon and emerges as a moth or butterfly – a process of fundamental transformation.

'with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me'. An encounter with Christ that transforms, transforms the way I look at myself, at other people, at God.

Transfiguration, transformation. It is in this that I see a huge contrast between the two events that I recalled as occurring in this week of the Feast of the Transfiguration. The 75th Anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima; the Cold War, in the years that followed was sustained by a threat of mutual destruction. These years were marked by confrontation, by a demonising of the ‘other side’, by fear. This was a period of intransigence, each side threatening conflict.

On the other hand, this week has seen the death, and with it a celebration of the life of John Hume, one who has had a profound impact on the life of Northern Ireland in a career that spanned more than 40 years. I just want to pick up on that idea of transfigure, transform.

I had arrived in Dublin in 1968, shortly before the violence erupted in Northern Ireland and I watched the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. And then there was the introduction of Internment, Bloody Sunday and the descent into chaos that was to last over 30 years. We moved up to the Parish of Ahoghill in 1989. Ahoghill was the Parish of Terence O’Neill, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland who had tried to move things on in the mid 1960’s. We got there 4 years after the Anglo Irish Agreement; the hunger strikes were still fresh in everyone’s memories. Politically things were in log jam and in that vacuum there were a series of nasty tit-for-tat sectarian attacks. The middle ground was an increasingly uncomfortable place to occupy. The Alliance Party, in which much hope had been placed, was in steep decline; moderate unionists, including James Curry, onetime Mayor of Ballymena, came under fierce attack from the extremes. It was increasingly tempting for people to drift

towards the extremes. But there were people who stayed there in the middle. The Corrymeela Community provided a safe haven for those affected by the violence, including those hounded out of areas by paramilitaries. They also provided a neutral venue for the very early, very secret talks between the different parties as well as the paramilitaries.

Then in the public sphere there were those politicians who doggedly held the middle ground including John Hume and Seamus Mallon, propounding a consistent message of non-violence, reconciliation, of the need to recognise the basic humanity of those who differ from you, of the need for everyone, nationalist and unionist to feel they had a place in a shared Northern Ireland. It was said by his detractors that John Hume had a single transferable speech, but it was the same fundamental message, doggedly, stubbornly held to, that could be summed up in words spoken in the darkest days of the Troubles, in which he said

“Bloodshed for political change prevents the only change that truly matters: in the human heart”. *John Hume*

Along the way they faced criticism not only from Unionists but also from their own community. But little by little, the politics of moderation, with the encouragement of politicians in the United States, Britain and Europe began to gain traction until the tortuous negotiations of the Peace Process, chaired by Senator Mitchell came to a successful conclusion on Good Friday 1998.

I will always remember that Good Friday. I had watched the news conference at the conclusion of the talks and then went to take my Good Friday services in Portglenone and Ahoghill. I recall the reaction of one man as I arrived at the

Church; ‘Sir, I never thought that I would live to see this day.’ I recall a sense of relief bordering on exhilaration in so many people.

Of course there were opponents and those who sought to derail the whole process but Northern Ireland politics was never the same since that day. There was transformation – there was transfiguration.

I’ve spoken a lot recently of God using ordinary people. He also raises up extraordinary people – we remembered one, John Hume, with thanks giving this week.