

LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

John 1:1-5

The Corrymeela Community
Rededication Service 12 January 2025

Sixty years ago this month, a small band of earnest young Christians found what they were looking for on the north coast of Ireland – a site that could serve as a place of retreat, a place to meet and learn and wrestle with faith and relationships – a place to be more human with each other; to love as God calls us to love. Across the water from the beacons of Rathlin, it would serve as another kind of lighthouse: a place on the journey to help guide their way.

My sense is that in those early days, the motivating force was optimism. There was a real sense that the world was moving in the right direction, that the arc of the universe was bending towards justice, and the community that called itself Corrymeela would help be part of that change. They wanted to call the church back to its better self. To drive the political conversation towards civil rights. To do nothing less than usher in the kingdom of God on earth, and maybe even Ulster. It was only a matter of time. A heroic, idealistic impulse – fuelled by faith and youthful enthusiasm. But as the mid-sixties led to the late sixties and to the early seventies and to the darkest periods of our conflict, much of that optimism started slipping away. Corrymeela became a place with less heroic ambitions, a place to hold on to whatever hope you still had, and to remind yourself despite all the evidence to the contrary that a better world was still possible, that a better us was still possible, that the kingdom of God was still within reach. Here in this community, we experienced joy and laughter and learning and belonging. Here we experienced hope. And for many people, when things were especially dark, Corrymeela became all the more vital; its light shining brighter in the dominant darkness. A shelter in the storm; a refuge from the conflict; a reminder that all was not lost.

I've been a Leader now for five years – and I can say that in the last few years there has been a noticeable increase in the number of people and organisations reaching out to Corrymeela almost with a hint of desperation; certainly with experiences of disorientation. There are storms in their lives, both real and metaphoric. A darkness has descended that seems only to grow. They want to come and learn from our practice; they are searching for something to make sense of this life; they expect we have answers to give. We will not have many of those; but what we do have seems increasingly rare. And precious. And vital. For many this community of belonging, this lived knowledge of reconciliation is a great source of light, and in darkness it grows all the brighter. It draws more and more people.

I always get a little nervous when folks reach out in this way. Light in the darkness can be reassuring; but light can also be harsh: exposing our flaws and our scars, our hypocrisies and our failings. Come closer to this light and you will see our faults first hand. As we have said goodbye to some people recently, they have expressed sadness and frustration (sometimes anger) in how our words do not match our actions; how our behaviour does not demonstrate our values. I am reminded of what someone said about America and its much-vaunted dream: that despite all the evidence, America is not a lie; it is a disappointment – and it can only be a

disappointment because it is also a hope. Corrymeela is not a lie. A community of reconciliation is not lie. But is often a disappointment, because it is also a hope.

For 60 years now, the members of Corrymeela have committed themselves to each other and to reconciliation as an expression of how people can live well together. We do it again today. We do this not so much because we think we can change the world, but because we want to resemble what a changed world would look like.

A world where we love one another especially when we are hard to love; where we try to forgive each other as God only can forgive; where we refrain from judging because we know we are no better than those we condemn; it is a world where we are eager to learn from each other (particularly when we disagree, particularly when we are in conflict) because we know the joy of discovering how incomplete we are without the other.

In this, we fail and start again, and fail and start again, and find joy and learn to laugh at ourselves, and learn to listen in new ways, always with enough faith to believe that a better us is possible.

Once again, the cover for our prayer guide and community directory is by Seán Harvey, and again Seán has created something through art that does a better job of expressing what I'm trying to say. Here in this darkness is a lighthouse. There is a storm raging. The framing of the piece makes it look as if the pages from the interior of the book are being exposed, the text from inside barely visible. But as the beams of light pass across the text, words become legible: 'May we dare to hope every day.' 'May we be courageous today.'

Despite not being able to see clearly, what we need is already at hand: there is courage that lies in our hearts; there is hope that lives in community. What we need is the light to see it.

We are now entering uncertain times. Storms are raging, both real and metaphoric. Our founding generation will not be with us forever. How we are to be a community of reconciliation in 2025 and 2035 and 2085 has yet to be seen. But there is still light available that shines in this darkness. There is hope that remains despite all the evidence. There is courage to become what a changed world would look like. It comes in knowing that in the end, what saves us is not a political solution or a technological advance, or a project or a programme or a new strategic plan. It is love. Love alone will save us. That is the light that will dispel all the darkness. And we find love within community; we find ourselves within community; we find hope within community.

Our prayer is that sixty years from now, those who are searching will find what they need on the north coast of Ireland: a place of retreat, a place to meet and wrestle with faith and relationships – a place to learn how to be more human with each other; to love as God calls us to love. Across the water from the beacons of Rathlin, may they find another kind of lighthouse: a place on the journey to help guide their way.

And as we begin our next 60 years, wherever this journey may take us, may Corrymeela continue to serve as a light in the darkness, a reliable (if reliably flawed) reminder of the world's great hope that is God's great love. Amen.