

transforming division through human encounter

homily for Corrymeela Sunday
at Coventry Cathedral, March 18, 2018.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart
of every one
who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth
of everyone
who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye
that sees me,
Christ in every ear
that hears me.

corrymeela 

Each year, we as Corrymeela come to England as a pilgrimage of thanks. For the 1970s and 1980s and before and after, Corrymeela was supported — through love, time, volunteering, thanks — by the generosity of people and churches across England.

It is always an honour to be here as a witness of thanks on this pilgrimage of gratitude.

We are in tense times across our jurisdictions these days. Today I want to reflect on Irish and British relations through the lens of our current public sentiments and the scriptures from today's lectionary.

I remember the first time I came to England. England was many things to me:

The place where the second language of Ireland came from.

The place where Enid Blyton came from.

The place where football teams I didn't care about came from but where music I did love came from.

The place that had come to us centuries ago.

The place where I wasn't sure how my accent would be heard.

On that trip, we stopped in Wales for most of the time. I made a special attempt to learn some Welsh words in advance and tried desperately to overhear people speak Welsh. I was delighted to hear some.

And then we crossed over the border, into England.

I looked around, desperate to know more about this place, the relationship with which, had consumed so much of the past centuries of Ireland.

I was 11, and full of both wonder and fear. We stepped around the market town of Chester. I felt foreign for the first time in my life. I wondered if people there thought as frequently about us as we thought about them.

The state of relations between Britain and Ireland these days are the stuff of news. It is being discussed through the lens of Brexit, the border, diplomatic relations between Dublin and Westminster, political negotiations involving the leaders of all of the jurisdictions of Britain and Ireland.

To speak about British/Irish relations we must speak about pain. There are families from all across Britain and Ireland who are bereaved because of the bereavements of the Troubles. Once a Protestant friend of mine was in England, and a woman came up and said: 'Are you from Northern Ireland?' 'My son was killed a few years ago,' the English woman said. 'I just wanted to tell you that. I just needed to tell you that. I miss him. He was so young. We miss him. We miss him.'¹

So many families on this island live with the grief of who they missed. In Irish, to be bereaved is to be troubled hence why we talk about the Troubles — it means The Bereavements.

And there were so many of them — over 3600.

And that's the deaths. There are also the traumas, from injury to shock at being an ambulance worker first on the scene to an atrocity.

The story of Britishness and Irishness and our relations with each other goes back centuries. When you ask some people to start the story, they start in 1968. Others start with partition in 1921. Others go to 1916, others go to the famine in 1839, others go to the plantations of Munster and Ulster. Others go to the day when their child, a young soldier, was killed in Belfast. Or when they first saw troops on the streets. Or when they met someone from Ireland, or England, and fell in love with them and married them. Or when they had to leave their homes because of how their friendships were viewed, or how their profession was viewed.

¹ *Troiblóidí na Sasanach* from 'Sorry for your Troubles' Canterbury Press, 2013.

Emily Dickinson wrote ‘The Past is such a curious creature’.² She’s right. It is. When you turn to the past you realise that often the past isn’t the past at all. It’s right here. Whether something happened 40 years ago or 400 years ago or 40 minutes ago, it can have a potency to alert us.

I don’t think that’s a bad thing. In fact, I like it. History is always in the future as well as the past. But Emily Dickinson warns us that the past is armed with ammunition. It can transport us, or disgrace us. It’s a thing to be careful with.

The readings today speak of the past. From the Prophet Jeremiah we hear how he has God say “The days are coming” — speaking about the future before speaking about the broken past of broken covenants.

The prophet speaks about hope, about days when the heart would be the place of encounter, about days of justice and interdependence, about days of faithfulness and friendship, about days when the laws of living are akin to the ease of breathing, when our hearts will sing with the joy of right relationship.

Everybody reading it knew that this was hope. But was it just (only) hope, or Just Hope? Can it create for us a way of living together, despite the failures and fractures of the past?

I don’t know if it can. But it needs to.

In the lectionary psalm for today, we hear King David praying a prayer for repentance for his involvement in the appropriation of Bathsheba and the hitjob on her Hittite husband.

What would Bathsheba have made of David’s prayer of repentance? She who had been left bereft — husband dead, baby dead, now part of the coterie of wives of David.

“Against you and you alone have I sinned’ David prays.

Really? What would Bathsheba have thought if she’d heard that prayer.

² Emily Dickinson, J1203

At the heart of our pains with each other, whether it's David & Bathsheba, whether it's Ireland and Britain, is the story of blame. It's a wound for us. It hurts us. And we are divided about what divides us.

When pains go on for centuries we forget whether we had any part in the pain and find comfort in the blame of others.

— David knew he was entirely to blame for the pain of Bathsheba.

— Each of us here will have our own reading of the history of Ireland and England, with associated blames, and it's important to realise that there's plenty of blame to go around. But the more important question for me is not "Who is to blame" but rather, "How do we live together now?"

Whatever the changing nature of the Irish border, the changed relationships between the jurisdictions of Ireland and Britain, whatever the diplomatic, or political, or community relations between peoples of these islands, we have to turn to is each other.

We can only get through this together. Nobody is going anywhere, so we need to turn towards each other. Anything less than this fails us.

We need a new covenant of the heart. A covenant towards each other.

It is twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement, that landmark agreement that was a demonstration at just how beautiful political language can be.

It spoke about an era of concord between our peoples. IT spoke about guaranteeing both rights and freedoms and identities and respects in perpetuity.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit."

This is what we hear in today's gospel from John.

It comes from a man at the end of himself. Jesus, in John's gospel, has been going through the countryside, performing signs attracting attention of those who did not like his message, bringing attention towards the relations of power between peoples: settled peoples, arriving peoples, occupying peoples, peoples with agendas, peoples with pain.

As time intensified and his message intensified, people seemed to want a show-down, a battle, a war. Take out your sword and cut off an ear, we hear. Call down fire! we hear. We thought you were going to return to us our homeland, we hear. Someone even pretended to take a bribe in the hope that it'd stir up a revolution.

And I think that Jesus knew all of these desires, and knew that they revealed the sometimes rotten heart of the world, where we think that the only way forward is through more war.

Let the grain of wheat die, he said, in order that it may bear fruit. An agricultural metaphor. A metaphor of nature. A metaphor where he didn't see himself as the centre of things, but rather knew that the heart needed to be revealed, broken, and built up.

He, too, imagined a future where people across divisions could be united in something that was bigger than their agendas.

He, too, imagined a covenant of the heart where we turn towards each other, not from each other.

There is so much pain between the peoples of Ireland and Britain, this is true.

But pain does not need to divide us. We can look to our divisions and make monuments, covenants, commitments to be better with each other, finding ways to mark the shared and dividing pain of the past; the different versions of the story that divide us; and say that built on the pyre of division is the prayer of interdependence: we will do better with and for each other.

What is also true is that there is so much life between our countries. There are entire families who live in one jurisdiction who count down the days until they visit their loved family and friends in another jurisdiction. There has been music and language and culture that has crossed borders and crossed back between us. The royal and presidential visits of the past decade demonstrate the good will that exists; good will that must be tended with courtesy and curiosity, with language, lamentation and longing.

At Corrymeela our mission is to Transform Division Through Human Encounter. We do this knowing that human encounter — where we are truthful, open, vulnerable, joyous, our full and safest and best selves with each other — is what will help us in our relations between these islands, in our political and policy decisions, in our brave examining of our culpability in violences that have crisscrossed the Irish sea. As we face these next years, we know our witness is to be faithful to how the relationships between people from these islands of Britain and Ireland can be improved: political, social, ecumenical, inter-religious, intergenerational.

We are not the same, thank god.

What we need are muscular and meaningful ways of speaking to and about each other.

What we need are ways to be attentive to the things that will help us all to live, with ourselves, with each other, intermingled, interdependent.

This is a covenant of the heart.

It is something as fierce as friendship, friendship that says “We have survived the hurts we have inflicted. Now is the time for hope, not just hope, but a Just Hope that creates the future we need in order to live through the tensions of today.”

In this project, it is all peoples of Ireland and Britain that are needed. The pain of the past is not going away, we know this. The tensions about Britain and Ireland are located on the border, and on the relations between peoples of our islands. We all voted different ways, I am sure. We all need to turn towards each other in new ways now. Not away from what we voted, no. We need to turn in a different way: towards each other. With a covenant of

friendship and survival and the heart. With a pilgrimage of reciprocal relationship and thanks.

This morning I bring you the heartfelt thanks and prayers and earnest hopes for serious peace together from the Corrymeela Community.

Peoples in these islands, we have survived and received so much from each other.

Let us deepen our flourishing. Let us deepen our grateful thanks. Let us deepen our powerful witness to what can happen when we turn towards each other with a heart nurtured by the courage to be vulnerable, be reconciling, be forgiving, be changing and belong, to each other.

Críost in ár gcroí
Críost linn go leir.

Christ in our hearts.
Christ with us all.