

## ADDRESS AT THE SERVICE OF DEDICATION January 2006

Two texts:

The first from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians chapter one, verse 19

“For in him [that is Jesus Christ] every one of God’s promises is a yes”.

The second is from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter chapter three, verse 15

“Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you”.

What I see the first text as meaning is this: that God’s wish for reconciliation, for peace, for justice, for healing finds its yes in Jesus Christ.

Similarly the hope that the scapegoats again find their place in the community and that the victims will not be permanently silenced finds its yes in Jesus Christ. All of this is the grace of new vision, of new horizons, given in Jesus Christ who is God’s yes.

This does not remove suffering, victimisation, exclusion and affliction from our world, as the first part of chapter one of the Corinthians text makes clear. But they are part of the context of the yes.

We are simply people who live with the hope of a yes. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican poet George Herbert beautifully articulates this for me in the following words:

*Come my way, my truth, my life  
Come my light, my feast, my strength*

Which brings me to the second text

“Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you”.

There is a temptation or a tendency to look with morbid fascination on what has gone wrong, or what is going wrong. It’s part of human life. And we in Corrymeela are no exception in this. There is the pleasant schadenfreude of watching things go wrong and there is the destructive tendency to encourage them to go wrong. Our personal negativity has a wish for general negativity.

When Peter tries to counteract human weakness with words of hope, he did not encourage people to say what was wrong with the world, the church or society. He did not ask people to draw up a list of problems or negatives. Instead he asks them simply to give an account of the hope that is in them “Explain the hope you have in you”.

So as a challenge to you all at a Service of Dedication, at the start of a New Year: “Explain the hope you have in you” or to put it another way “say why you are here”.

Let me sketch some aspects of what hope looks like for us

- When people meet across unexpected lines
- When honest conversation occurs
- When we learn something new, instead of repeating the old patterns
- When real change occurs

In someone's words "what goes on up there I don't know but it works".

And all of you could add to the list. And tell stories.

And we see what hope looks like in persons. One of those persons died just before Christmas. Una O'Higgins O'Malley in her person incorporated the bloody history of Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her father, Kevin O'Higgins, was murdered when she was five months old. He was the man who did what was necessary to ensure that the Free State would survive. Her grandfather too was murdered. On the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her father's murder she arranged for a Mass to be held which remembered him and the three Republicans who had killed him. She was a founder of Glenree and a pioneer of North/South understanding and of the politics of forgiveness.

I would like to read one of her poems. It is called 'Forgiveness', written just after the Good Friday Agreement was signed. It is about Easter and it is about the politics of forgiveness.

## FORGIVENESS

"So there he stood upon the shore  
with everything in waiting.  
The fire was going well,  
fresh fish were grilling  
and they would bring some more  
(this would confirm their own importance).  
And at that Easter breakfast  
he would hear from Peter.  
No decommissioning of the past  
nor rank betrayals would be mentioned  
simply 'Bring more fish' and 'Do you love me?'

Today as mists clear from the Agreement,  
hammered in Belfast last Good Friday evening.  
a voice speaks from far South Africa  
of truth and reconciliation  
and puts a definition on forgiveness:  
'It is', the bishop says,  
'a way of dealing with the past  
so as to plan the future'.

Poor Peter's past had been disastrous  
but he was asked to bring along his gifts

of fish and loving;  
nothing more was needed  
to complete this paschal sharing  
and look towards the future.”

At the AGM I said the title was “Then there were Flowers”. I had had the experience when Dermot Ahern, the Irish Foreign Minister was at Corrymeela and the flowers appeared and I said that expressed something about a tradition of hospitality. Now I want to add to “Then the Flowers appeared and I saw Frank’s picture”. For there is a picture of Frank Wright in the lounge too. There is a communion of the present with the past and the living with the dead. We are nourished by those who have gone, even those we have never met. Frank shortly before he died said “It’s been great”. In the difficult times let us be nourished by the good stories and those who have gone before.

There are times when you know why Corrymeela has to exist, when something profoundly shocking hits you in this society. For me this last year it was one fact. The Housing Executive spends £45 million a year in relocating people who have been forced out of their homes. This is at an apparent time of ‘peace’.

So let us have no doubt that Ray’s vision is as relevant as it always has been. And we cannot assume that things in Corrymeela will continue to exist in their present form. Large amounts of resources have been injected into Northern Ireland over the last 35 years and we have received our share. We have to see this in historical terms as abnormal. I have been to 3 closure events in the last four months and I expect to be at more. There are tough times ahead. There is no going back to how things were. We are journeying as aliens and strangers into foreign lands. And we were always aliens and strangers, not at home in the present dispensation. That is how we started.

I received a profound shock just before Christmas. I was delivering a Christmas card to John Morrow and I noticed something was wrong. The former Presbyterian Community Centre had been demolished. The place where Corrymeela was founded. Gone. Ray Davey and John Morrow’s home. Gone. Philip Morrow and Duncan Morrow’s bedroom. Gone. Where we were married. Gone. Truly there is no abiding city.

What we can do is to affirm the vision and live boldly no matter what happens, confident in God’s Yes, confident that we will be able to be held, knowing that there is always a ministry of reconciliation and being ready to give an account of the hope that is in us.

David Stevens