

## St Columba's Swords 200

Saturday 09 June 2018

Part of a verse from today's Gospel reading, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus".. [John 12.21]

Familiar words spoken by some Greek pilgrims to the Passover feast in Jerusalem, addressed to the apostle Philip, who then speaks to Andrew, who then (with Philip) goes to tell Jesus. We do not know what, if anything, Jesus says to the pilgrims, but we do know that this for him was a crucial turning point in his ministry. Now he knows that his ministry has reached out beyond the confines of his initial engagement with his Jewish followers. He is open to the world and has been opened to the wider world of those who are outside this small group. He knows also that this means glory, but a strange glory - the glory of his death on the cross.

Much of what we might want to say about the vocation of this parish, two hundred years on from the building of this beautiful church, is summed up in those words, *We wish to see Jesus*. We are called to be open to a world - a world which is today changing constantly, and even frighteningly before our eyes - so that men and women and children may be drawn to say to us, *We wish to see Jesus*. *What is this religion thing about? What is it really about? Is there anything behind the externals of religious faith that could convince us of meaning and of purpose in this life and for this world?*

As we reach back into the history of this place, we should be able to hear echoes of this. It was a monastery from the time of St Columba. This was a period in Irish life when the monastery was the beating heart of a local community. It was the place to which people were drawn for security of every kind, not least spiritual security. But they were dangerous times. St Columba himself, driven into exile out of Ireland, had to leave his "comfort zone" far behind, as he travelled to Scotland and on to Iona where people - to this day - travel to find Jesus. The great round tower of Swords and the later belfry, both still standing in close proximity to this church, were built not only to remind people of Christ's presence but also to call them to this presence. But whether we are to look back to the monastery of the early Christian church on this island and the presence of your patron St Columba fifteen hundred years ago, or to the round tower of the tenth century over a thousand years ago, or to the square belfry tower of the later mediaeval period, the message is the same - the Church of God does not exist for itself alone but also and even primarily, for those outside the walls of the Church who wish to find Jesus Christ. And so with this beautiful Georgian church - designed by an Armagh architect (!) - the call remains the same. This is not to be the comfort zone where people can luxuriate in each other's company and bring God into the conversation, as suits. When Greek pilgrims sought out Jesus in Jerusalem, it changed the entire mainstay of his ministry.

But, as it happens, 1818 (when this church was completed) was a very comfortable time for the Church of Ireland. Due largely to the munificence of the Board of First Fruits - with money (it should be admitted) that had been extracted from the whole population of Ireland, and not simply members of the Church of Ireland - it is estimated that in the twenty years following the Act of Union in 1800, well over five hundred glebe houses or rectories were built, and nearly seven hundred churches were either built or remodelled through the length and breadth of Ireland, and funded largely through grants and loans from the Board of First Fruits. The comfort was not to last. In the 1830s, the support of the bulk of the tithing income was removed and the Church faced major reorganisation, very reluctantly. And at the end of the 1860s, one hundred and fifty years ago next year, the Church of Ireland was forced to confront the uncomfortable reality that it must learn to support itself as a voluntary institution.

As the world has changed around us over the past two centuries, the Church has so often had to play catch-up. Sometimes it has succeeded and sometimes it has failed miserably. The Church is not at the centre of community life, or of Irish life in general. It has to face the alternatives of retreating into a bunker for the like-minded, or of risking itself by moving beyond established decorum and the peddling of convenient truisms. In this parish, you have been well served by clergy who have undoubtedly encouraged you to think beyond and outside what the poet A E Housman called “the land of lost content”. By a nice piece of serendipity, I have known your succeeding rectors though a period of over sixty years, literally since childhood. Canon Ernest Greening was a good friend of my father who was rector of Drumcondra and North Strand during the 1950s and 1960s. Canon Bill Moynan was my father’s curate during the earlier part of that period. Canon Stanley Baird is a friend of long standing who was also a rector of Drumcondra and North Strand before moving to Swords. Canon Robert Deane was a divinity student while I was chaplain in Trinity College Dublin, and later our paths crossed again as he was Rector of Edenderry Union when I moved to Meath and Kildare as Bishop in the mid-1990s. You have indeed been well served by your rectors, and with courage and imagination, and I would like at this point to wish Canon Deane and Anne every happiness in his forthcoming retirement. and also to thank him for the kind invitation to be with you today, and for the Archbishop of Dublin’s willing agreement that I should be part of these proceedings.

One of the supplications in today’s collect - that for St Columba’s Day - is that the Church, in following the faith and courage of St Columba, may so proclaim the splendour of God’s grace that people everywhere may come to know his Son as their Saviour. This is indeed a tough ask in a culture that does not seem to have much grip on its heritage of faith in this country. Faith itself seems so often to be understood as an optional add-on extra to a supposed “real life” for those who might inexplicably feel the benefit of it. The days have past when we may make any presumption of any gravitational pull for the outside world towards the life of an individual parish. Any instinctive yearning to come to see Jesus has been well muted and suppressed.

It was, as you will know, a little over fourteen and a half centuries ago and probably around this time of year that Columba and a few companions began their community life on the island of Iona, just off the west coast of Scotland. In many ways it was Iona that captured the imagination of those who in the middle of the last century pushed for S Columba to be given a place on a par with S Patrick in the consciousness of the Church of Ireland as a whole. It was from that little community, smaller than any Church of Ireland parish, and from that small island, of Iona that Christianity was taken to much of Scotland and northern England. And the important thing to remember is that it was two-way traffic. Iona was on an axis. For if Columba and his fellow monks went out *from* Iona to bring the Gospel to the society around, it was *to* Iona that the newly converted king of Dal Riada, Áedán, would come to be crowned and anointed by Columba in 574. Iona came to symbolise a place from which to go out to change the world, and also a place to which the world could come with the wish to find Christ.

That challenge is the challenge to every Christian community and every parish. We honour the tradition we have inherited when it becomes the loadstone of our endeavours as a community named in honour of Columba, and as the twenty-first century custodians of that tradition. It will not be our words that convince. The French poet and dramatist Paul Claudel put it very neatly – “Speak about Christ only when asked, but live so that people will ask about Christ”. It is our life in the world outside these walls that will enthuse and encourage others. It is our actions of unfeigned love and integrity that will intrigue others whose faith in life itself has become jaded and contemptuous. It is then that people may ask about Christ. It is then that people may say to us, “We wish to see Jesus”.