

Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin. 17th March 2024. Richard Carson

I would like to thank the Dean, Dermot, and Rev. Prof. Anne Lodge for this opportunity to contribute to your Lenten series on the question the 'expert in the law' posed to Jesus - who is my neighbour?

There is a place in Finland called Onkalo. In Onkalo they store the nuclear waste that is generated from a nearby nuclear energy plant. For the next 100 years nuclear waste will be placed in Onkalo, down a 1km tunnel that has been dug into the ground. And then the tunnel will be sealed.

The nuclear waste must be buried so deeply because it is radioactive. If released it could destroy all life for hundreds of miles around. It will remain radioactive for about 100,000 years. So those building Onkalo have a challenge. What do they place at the entrance to the tunnel. Do they place a warning? If so, in what languages? What should the warning say? Do they use signs and symbols? Remember this tunnel must remain untouched for another 100,000 years. Not just 1,000 or 10,000 but 100,000 years. Maybe it is best not to put anything at the entrance as any sign is bound to attract attention.

One of the leaders of the project, faced with this challenge, made this memorable statement:

**"Onkalo is the place we must remember to forget"**

When we look to make sense of such potentials of horror of such unknowns of the distant future, as Christians our minds turn to remembrance, **of a place we must remember to never forget.**

As we come together to celebrate the Eucharist we remember that 2,000 years ago in and around Jerusalem a sequence of events and encounters took place that inform all that is and is to come. As a result, we remember differently, we remember forward. Why? Because the events of that place are not merely an inspiration or example for how we live. They are not useful resources for our latest attempt to make a positive impact in our world, measure that impact and reassure ourselves of our worth as a result.

They are defining events that mean we do not live through a linear movement of past to present to endless future determined by the clock and calendar. Rather, we live remembering the past with what Johann Baptist Metz described as dangerous memory that moves us toward a peaceful future that is **both already and not yet**. Not yet because we live in a violent world where we still must ask the question 'Who is my neighbour?', our sinfulness still bringing us to the table today. Already, because history is pregnant with God's time, with the hope and promise that all is being and will be made new. In our readings today, with the citing of an ancient priest Melchizedek and in our gospel reading where God become flesh is predicting his own death, we encounter what C.S. Lewis described as "Deeper Magic from before the dawn of time". We come to remember the God who

has not forgotten us. Yet these words come from a place and a time. That gospel reading is from Jerusalem as some Greeks have a question for Jesus at the start of what we now describe as Holy Week, like a tantalising trailer for the unparalleled remembering we will commence next Sunday when all of time seems to hinge on **the place we must remember to never forget.**

Just a couple of kilometres from here, in that direction, lies another place we must remember to never forget. There, until relatively recently, was an unmarked grave of over 200 children. The children were residents of Bethany Home in Rathgar, named after the place Jesus and the disciples spent the night on Palm Sunday after the events of our gospel reading. In 2021 the government published a report following a Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes across the country, that included Bethany. Unlike most other institutions Bethany's ethos was in the Protestant tradition. Indeed the Dean of this Cathedral was presiding in the Chair at the opening meeting of Bethany Home on 4th May 1922. The Commission commended the survivors of Bethany for erecting a memorial at the grave such that it is no longer unmarked and has suggested that other local groups around the country follow this example of how to remember their place.

The place of Bethany will face a new challenge in how it is remembered in the coming years. Soon, the Office of Public Works will seek planning permission for a new national museum on Sean MacDermott street in inner city Dublin at the site of the former Magdalene Laundry. One of the many big challenges faced by the curators of the new museum will be how to remember women and children who experienced harm in the many places of Protestant ethos in a venue of distinct Roman Catholic memory.

That museum will be located in an area of current focused regeneration under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach - The North East Inner City of Dublin. It is the area of St. George and St Thomas Parish whose place of worship on Cathal Brugha St acts as something of a gateway from the city centre of O'Connell St to the inner city. That area is one of the locations of our work in ACET where we run a number of projects responding to community addiction and supporting health inclusion for migrants, all through the story of HIV. That place has experienced more than its fair share of trauma, exclusion and harm. From its founding over 250 years ago as a suburb of Dublin made up of reclaimed land from swamps and ponds, hosting refugees and their ancestors from religious wars across Europe, then its time as a place of residence of the elite of Dublin was followed by a 19th century demise as the city expanded to new suburbs. The era of tenement housing and later profound poverty extended towards the early 1980s when a perfect storm of high youth unemployment, the arrival of heroin and HIV from opposite directions and an insipid public health response to the emerging crises devastated the area. More recently all the facets of our housing crisis can be found there with emergency accommodation and another chapter of those who have newly come to our shores being hosted in this area. It is a place of rich diversity and of resilience with about 20 churches tucked into the square kilometre.

Many parts of the city and country have been impacted by drugs, HIV and the challenge of integration but few areas have had to navigate them while in the tight confines of an inner city where everything is on top of everything, where that which is adjacent can seem miles away and where connection with the place, with the ground beneath one's feet can seem fleeting.

Crucially, for our understanding of that place and as we ponder the question, "Who is my neighbour?" it is a place that has experienced these difficulties not as a result of chance or mere circumstance.

Describing that specific area around Gardiner Street, the Irish Times in an editorial from just last December stated that:

*The truth is that ever since independence successive administrations – and by extension the people who elected them – have treated the population of Dublin's inner city with suspicion and disrespect. From the tenements of the early 20th century onward, people who generally live in the comfortable suburbs have made decisions that affect the lives of those who live in the centre. Too often those decisions have been misconceived. Sometimes they have been disastrous.*

The North east inner city of Dublin has been **a place we seem to have forgotten to remember.**

The Yale theologian, Willie James Jennings, offers us some helpful thoughts, particularly for those of us who identify with those 'comfortable suburbs'.

Taking his starting point within the colonial project of the last few centuries, Jennings articulates an idea we hold that keeps us stuck in the question "Who is my neighbour?" without encountering the radical fulfilment of its answer.

That idea is the line.

The line separates spaces that were once not separate,

The line encloses space and thrives on private possession

The line may run along a geographical feature like a river or a construction like a road or a postcode but it is best understood as a way of thinking a way of living,

The line divides neighbours, separating worlds by inches.

In the Chapter House before this service, I found a greeting card from President Michael D. Higgins to the Cathedral for this St. Patrick's Day. The card includes the text of a poem written by President Higgins entitled *Exiles*. It includes these words which encapsulate what the line is all about:

*It is the time of a single idea,  
Crippling, vicious and deadly,  
Closing us off  
From what we imagined of a world  
We have not yet managed to create.*

For Jennings the line includes the red lines drawn across racial divisions in US cities in the 20th century. For us the line might not always be so obvious yet it is all around.

Through our housing, schooling, our wealth and even our churches we reinforce the line. Remember, the line, Jennings emphasises, is a part of our imaginations, our way of viewing the world,

It is not just about a line driven through places. The line erodes the possibility of imagining needs together, The needs for food, health, security, safety, shelter. Instead, with the line, we imagine these needs in fragmented ways.

In Leviticus 19 it says we are to treat the foreigner as the native, to love them as ourselves. And on this St Patrick's Day we remember the one who came from foreign shores with the gospel and became of ourselves. Yet, this love is impossible when the line holds captive our imaginations.

The line keeps us in our comfortable suburbs and keeps those suburbs comfortable.

The line drowns out our hearing of the cry of the oppressed.

The line is energised by amnesia.

The line leaves us **with places we don't even have to remember to forget**

Echoing that earlier Irish Times editorial Jennings puts an application of the line in devastating theological terms when he says that:

*Every time you go from one neighbourhood and enter another and see inequality and say 'that is the way it is' you are calling that which is demonic natural."*

To address the question who is my neighbour we need to allow the places we live to teach us,

So what is the response?

The line runs so deep in our imaginations that philanthropy or mere sympathy are not enough.

Jennings, rather, reminds us that:

*The Gospel work is to rethink the line. The good news is that there is no line.*

He calls on us to:

*"Allow the lives of others to join our lives and these others are not our first choice."*

Who is your neighbour? Your neighbour is not your first choice.

Any kingdom where our neighbours are our first choice is not the Kingdom of God.

This "Allowing the lives of others to join our lives" will have material impact. It will mean undoing, or what the Bible calls, repenting, of where the line has found its home, both in our imaginations and in our cities.

The good news is that with the freedom and hope we celebrate in the Eucharist, we are free to rethink the line, to allow the lives of others to join our lives. We are free to give up our first choice, free to love the neighbour who is not like us and who is near, but because of the line, is far.

**We are free to remember the places we must never forget.**

We do so with hope that we might be and become what Walter Brueggemann describes as:  
*"a community rooted in energising memories and summoned by radical hope"*

The radical hope that neighbours are joined in love for one another and love for God - this is the power of God unto salvation,

This is the God who has not forgotten us.

This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and send the rich away empty.

Amen.