

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist
Sunday 9 August 2020

Trinity 9

I Kings 19.9-18
Romans 10.5-15
St Matthew 14.22-33

Last week's tributes to John Hume, Nobel peace laureate and sometime leader of the SDLP in Northern Ireland, were fulsome and well deserved. Those of my generation will remember him well. Younger people may have wondered who he was, because with the onset of dementia about fifteen years ago he'd withdrawn from public life.

John was born in Derry (or Londonderry) just north of the Irish border in January 1937. His father lost his ship repair job after the Second World War and never worked again. Growing up young John witnessed at first hand the effects of Protestant Unionist discrimination, as Catholics were told there were no job vacancies and the local council openly discriminated against them and gerrymandered the elections.

Like many of his contemporaries young John was angered by all this, and got himself involved in politics. And in Derry politics was divided along rigid sectarian lines. Unionism had built itself into the system. Its position was guaranteed. Its ethos and its ideology were as strong as the wind

witnessed by Elijah in the cave, breaking in pieces the rocks hurled against it by Nationalist resistance. But even as a young man John could see that the LORD was not in that wind, that ultimately that type of Unionism was bound to fail.

On the other side were the Nationalists, many of whom had given up on the political process because democracy seemed incapable of delivering change (let alone a united Ireland) given the forces ranged against it. John grew to maturity as the IRA was recruiting, and he came to maturity as civil order was breaking down. But the LORD was not in the fire of violent struggle.

John was among the first working-class Catholic boys to benefit from the award of a scholarship and on leaving school his father advised him to “stick to the books”. He explored a calling to the priesthood, studying for a time at Maynooth seminary in the Republic. It was as if he’d concluded that the Lord could only be found in the “still small voice of calm”. But like Elijah, when he left the college (where he’d switched to training as a teacher) he threw himself in the murky world of politics.

In our second reading this morning, we heard St Paul's famous words "But there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all." Note that our translation is careful not to say 'there is no difference' between the two. St Paul has after all just been writing about the different approaches of those whose righteousness came from the law and the person who 'believes with the heart and so is justified.'

John Hume was more than aware of the differences between the two communities among whom he lived, but he too shared St Paul's vision that there should be no distinction between Unionist and Nationalist. He'd studied Irish history as well as its politics. He saw that the only peaceable future lay in an "agreed Ireland", a place in which everyone, both northerners and southerners, "reached an accommodation as to how we share this piece of earth".

Early on he tried to form a new Nationalist political party, one that eschewed violence. But the Nationalist community was itself divided (sounds a bit like the Church, doesn't it?) and he was outmanoeuvred by political rivals. So he reluctantly

joined Gerry Fitt in setting up the SDLP, the Social Democratic and Labour Party. It gave him a platform, particularly as the party started to work with the Westminster government following the introduction of direct rule. But his brand of peaceable nationalism, and his willingness to work with 'the enemy', alienated him from many of his fellow Nationalists.

In the 1980s, as the violence was spiralling out of control, he initiated clandestine talks with the IRA. When people accused him of compromising his non-violent principles by talking to those with guns he replied that violence was compromising the cause and only delayed peace. His was a very lonely path. He was taking enormous political risks, because any untoward incident had the potential to completely derail his initiative, let alone his position.

I might be criticised at this point for pushing a gospel analogy too far this morning, but I don't think it's too much to say that his position in those days was as dangerous and, given the situation, his achievement as unlikely, as Peter walking on water. He was fully aware of the strong winds

blowing around him, the base beneath his feet was no more substantial than water. But he never doubted his vision, his belief that the two communities, north and south, had to find a way to peaceably share the same island.

One of the tributes I heard last week likened John Hume to Gandhi, and another to Nelson Mandela. I suspect he might have been embarrassed by such comparisons. But they are not so far off the mark, because like those two statesmen John Hume did change hearts. The IRA did decommission their weapons and enter the political process. The Reverend Ian Paisley did do the impossible and became a friend of Martin McGuinness. And the two communities on the island of Ireland are still finding ways of “sharing this piece of earth” together.