

AFTER ADVENT: HOPE AND COMMITMENT.

The Advent liturgical cycle came to a climax in the first reading on Christmas Day: 'The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone.' There is more than a little darkness clouding Ireland today. This darkness is the result of violence, prejudice and hatred. It is also the result of economic depression and the ills that have followed in its wake. Loneliness and grief may be the lot of those whose unemployed children have been forced to emigrate; disappointment and despair often haunt the hearts of the jobless who feel their country has no use for their energies and skills. Almost one-fifth of the Irish labour force is out of work.

The urgency of the situation has called forth the energies and stirred the imaginations of many people, Christian and non-Christian. Quite a number of small ventures have been started in different places and with various means throughout the country, but as yet they are making only a slight impact on the situation. The struggle goes on.

The Advent theme raised the question: what does the Christian bring to the struggle that is uniquely hers or his? Today, when those on the dole-queue expect little from the Churches and a number of the most committed have long renounced formal adherence to

Christian beliefs, this question needs to be addressed anew.

Clearly, the words of the gospel provide no economic blueprint: Christians should, by the same token, have realized by now that generalized appeals for justice and the elimination of poverty do not make up an economic policy. But at least the motivation is there: the gospel proclaims new values of solidarity, of sharing and equality and the concord which depends on it, of strict limits on the right to property, of the value and inalienable dignity of every person. Church leaders worry overmuch about the Church's "loss" of the working-class and those on the bottom of Irish society: they should worry more about the largescale implicit rejection of those values by the rich and powerful in our country, which amounts to a practical atheism. There are also other groups who hold similar values, even though their motivation may arise from sources other than the gospel. It would be incorrect and arrogant to claim that the Christian, is necessarily more loving, concerned or committed than the non-Christian. As George Bernanos wrote, 'Grace is everywhere': it is not confined to the moments of formal sacramental action. What is required of the Christian is that she or he should, alongside those who do not share their faith, work humbly for a better world.

Is there, then, nothing special that the Christian brings to the lifting of the darkness? Perhaps the Christian could bring hope. In these times with little prospect of immediate economic recovery and no mid-term likelihood of the exiles returning to find work here, the future looks just as clouded as the present. In dark times, people need hope. The hope that hard work, imagination, planning and activism will change the future is one we share with others, and in that sense our hope is as realistic - and as frail - as theirs. We need another hope, born not of what we think and hope our efforts will produce, but of religious faith. Christian faith, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, is 'the substance (ousia) of things hoped for, the assurance of things yet unseen'.



In other words, Christian faith (which is far richer than mere assent to a set of propositions) gives one the power to believe seemingly impossible things: that a poor carpenter who healed the sick and denounced injustice and paid with his life for both should have risen to new eternal life, and that Mother Ireland will someday devour its farrow no more in sectarian war and will have enough work for her children and even, as the lyrical Advent readings have it, summon her exiles home. All such beliefs have a certain utopian, impossible quality about them, since any hardheaded analysis of our situation would say that there is very little reason for thinking that we shall succeed tomorrow or next year in eliminating inequality and unemployment. If such beliefs are valid, or to be made valid, it will be against the odds; and Christian hope, the theme of Advent, is a needed support in the journey through the darkness.



COMMENT

This is the 2nd. number of "Comment", bulletin of the Unemployment Project of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. Through it we hope to share information and analysis of the unemployment situation and related issues with other groups who believe that work is the key to the social question of today. Each number will contain an extended treatment of one issue and a number of shorter pieces. We welcome feedback and dialogue on material covered in the bulletin. We are interested in taking united and effective action, with other groups, on these issues. Use this "Comment" in any way you like but please acknowledge the source if you are reproducing it.