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The FURROW

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Open Ground

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Open Ground

– *a new landscape*

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The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘post-truth’, its word of the year for 2016, as ‘relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. As one commentator put it: ‘Facts are negative. Facts are pessimistic. Facts are unpatriotic’.¹ Hence the arrival of grandstanding demagogues persuading gullible people to vote against the equivalent of gravity or the blue of the sky. Is it any wonder that our already shaky belief in the progress of the world should be as rattled as it is?

The Church is not immune from our pessimistic thinking despite the beacon that Pope Francis is. What chance has faith in a post-truth world? What chance for truth bearers? The role of ‘emotion and personal belief’ in the definition of ‘post truth’ might sound like good news for faith, but faith is not the commodity in question. Brendan Hoban is not alone in observing that the role of the priest has been degraded and that it has moved from a high-status/low stress profession to one of low status and high stress.

A HELPFUL CONVERSATION:

The most helpful conversation I have had in the light of the above, happened a few years ago in the company of Fr. Michael Rogers in Glendalough where I was part of a retreat in his Tearmann Spirituality Centre. At a point where conversation was becoming stuck in the groove of how terrible everything was, Michael looked out across Glendalough and suggested that the valley and its ruins could teach us all we needed to know. He pointed to the place where St. Kevin’s first settlement existed. How wonderful that first monastery must have been, the stone cells, the wooden huts, the life of prayer. But something happened to it. After a flowering, a

1 See *The Irish Times* Editorial, 17 November 2016.

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decay, a corruption of some kind. Centuries later, and not far away, we find another monastery in full bloom. Another new flowering. A round tower. A wonderful cathedral and stone buildings. An Abbot called Laurence O'Toole. But something happened to all that too. After a flowering, a decay, a corruption of some kind, dissolution.

Centuries later again we find another monastery in full bloom. It's an Augustinian monastery, a reforming church, great days of new beginnings and fresh hope. But something happened to that too. After a flowering, a decay, a corruption, dissolution.

And the story does not end there. It merely leaves the valley and moves on down towards the sea. A new landscape.

'How wonderful it must have been in those times of full flowering!' Michael said. 'How awful it must have been as decay and dissolution set in!'

The worst times of all, he suggested, were the in-between times, the times between the decay of one monastery and the beginning of another. How frightening these times must have been. The loss of shelter and familiarity, the grieving that it involved², those years and decades and centuries between the crumbling of old edifices and the digging of foundations for new ones, the times when new shoots were only to be imagined, times when all hope seemed lost, times that 'saw some people out' in what seemed like unending despair.

We live in such times, Michael suggested, and we have to come to terms with that. We have to realize that it is part of a cycle and that these days will be followed by better days but not even the better times will last forever as cycle follows cycle down the valley towards the near and far away Kingdom of God.

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I have never forgotten that conversation with Michael Rogers and the image of cycles of flowering and decay, shelter and exposure, stays with me always in interpreting the signs of the times. It gives me consolation in times like these. If what Michael says is true, we are currently a Church in open ground. After all that has happened in the last year we seem to be a civilization in open ground too. Even Science is in a kind of open ground between the anachronisms of the mechanistic worldview and the emerging quantum worldview which no longer makes the traditional sharp distinctions between the material, the mental and the spiritual. What a prospect that offers for faith, something of the opened ground that is ready for seeds as opposed to the opened ground of a grave that we imagine so easily, or the open season we seem to sense all around us.

2 Think of the classical stages of the grieving process: denial, depression, bargaining, anger, acceptance.

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ASPECTS OF THE LANDSCAPE

If we confine ourselves to the open ground in which the contemporary Church finds itself, some aspects of that landscape are hard to ignore. The large scale abandonments for example. Raniero Cantalamessa, the papal preacher, talks of the parable of the lost sheep being reversed. Then there are the conversations you have with people – about ‘being had’, about being ‘herded’, about ‘de-programming’. I hear a lot of personal stories about why people’s faith crumbled and why they have left the Church. We could talk about the radio programmes you have to endure and the articles you read about religion being a nightmare from which we are trying to awake. A recent article suggested that the Maynooth that formed so many of us was an ‘infantilizing institution’ where the ‘asphyxiating oppression’ induced in us an ‘emotional deep-freezing’ from which only named Promethean geniuses would escape.³ Most reductive of all, in my experience, are the humanist funerals where a man’s life can be reduced to his collection of CDs. The saddest thing about open ground is the abundance of lost sheep, the souls craving to belong and unable to, the tragic loss of expectation, the terrible normative passivity, the desperate yearnings for the Zimmer frames of old attachment combined with ‘don’t touch me’ growls rendered towards any recognizable source of old consolation. The image that comes to mind is of King Lear out in the storm, going mad with grief and bewilderment. Who could have imagined that it would come to this? At its fiercest, open ground is an apocalyptic force-field where other providers are at work and nets are constantly thrown over straying souls.

A MERCIFUL IMAGE

Despite the fierceness, open ground is a merciful image in many ways. It explains why tables had to be turned over. Why lintels did not hold. Why cutting things in stone does not necessarily protect us. It understands our hankering for old shelter, the craving to go back to old edifices, high liturgy and high collars, high certainty and the comforts of high clericalism. It allows us to visualize the march of progress down the valley of Psalm 23 and understands the terrible choices we have to make between minding the fewer sheep left in the fold and going out after the lost ones. It still allows us to think of our parishes and our beautiful parish churches and our schools as the sheepfolds of Christ the shepherd, as oases in open ground, as shelters in the storm, as merciful phone kiosks in the middle of our contemporary nowhere⁴. In touching upon the

3 Kathy Sheridan, *Different Class*, *The Irish Times Magazine*, Sat 10 October, 2016.

4 It is an irony that the word ‘Utopia’ – five hundred years old this year, literally means ‘no-where’.

scriptural concept of wandering in the desert ‘open ground’ offers the hint that lostness is a necessary precursor to finding. Seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you (Mt 7:7 , Lk 11:9). Isn’t there something merciful in the Jungian suggestion that where we stumble and fall there we will find treasure. And isn’t there something in Timothy Radcliffe’s prescription on preaching: that ‘We have nothing to say until we have nothing to say. It is only when we have to beg for a word that preaching can begin’. Finally isn’t there something merciful in reminding us of the open ground that always exists between ourselves and God in spite of his being nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

JESUS IN OPEN GROUND

The most consoling thing of all is that Jesus was so comfortable in open ground. It was his milieu. You only have to say it to realize how true it is. He *is* the open ground between the religion of the Pharisees and the early church. He is utterly familiar with the Israelite wanderings in the desert and with Isaiah’s ‘behold I make a new road’. He makes frequent use of a language of dislocation: ‘Let us cross to the other side’ (Mk 4:35); ‘Put out into deep water’ (Lk 5). He says things like: ‘The foxes have lairs, the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Lk 9:58). The scripture scholar, Denis McBride, gives a lovely exposition of the early verses of the Gospel of Mark where ‘All the Judean countryside and the people of Jerusalem’ were heading out into open ground ‘in great numbers’ to hear John the Baptist. Instead of pointing them back to Jerusalem, their holy place and temple, with, McBride tells us, as many as fifteen thousand temple priests, Jesus is among the de-campers, confirming John’s intuition that God’s forgiveness is available in ordinary space and that God makes our homelessness his home. When you think about Jesus you realize that even his style is an open ground style. He was a master of answering a question with a question. In the New Testament Jesus asked 183 questions, gave 3 answers, and answered 307 questions with a question in return.⁵ You can go so far as to say that Jesus was quite an iconoclast himself. I love the following sentence from Rowan Williams: ‘When Jesus has cleared out the temple, when he has thrown out those people involved in manufacturing religion, there he stands with his friends in a great silence and a great space’.⁶ There is an after-taste in that sentence that would take a good wine reviewer to describe - even if such a critic would be hard pressed to say if the lasting effect was sweet or bitter.

5 Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples* 2012.

6 Sermon at St Paul’s Within the Walls, Rome, Sunday March 11th, 2012.

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Jesus knew the bitter thing very well. He knew the Paschal nature of open ground. He knew what it was like when your world falls apart and your future collapses⁷. Speaking of Jesus' paschal moment, Donal Dorr writes: 'He could hardly have imagined that he would be so shamefully betrayed and abandoned by his friends and followers and that his mission and his life would come to an end in such an undignified and humiliating failure. This stretched his faith almost to breaking point'⁸ The big lesson for us that Jesus teaches, according to Dorr, is that it is 'not for us to specify how God's love will ultimately triumph'. That surely must be the ultimate message we carry in our hearts in the open ground of 2017.

If one thing else is sure, and each of us knows it in our own way, it is that Jesus is our companion in open ground. He is the one we turn to when there is no one else to turn to. Archbishop Anthony Bloom reflecting on the effects of the Russian Revolution of his youth said the following:

During the Revolution we lost the Christ of the great cathedrals, the Christ of the splendidly architected liturgies; and we discovered the Christ who is vulnerable as we are vulnerable. We discovered the Christ who was rejected as we were rejected, and we discovered the Christ who had nothing at his moment of crisis, not even friends, and this was similar to our experience. God helps us when there is no one else to help. God is there at breaking point, at the centre of the storm.

Jesus is the thread you never let go of. He is the rope tied to the back door in the blizzard. We hold on to the thread by linking our frail natures to his limitless divine power. When the thread is lost, as someone put it, life is fragmented into anecdotes that do not refer to God and to his Kingdom but become self-referential. If we have lost our way we need to put Jesus back into the centre of our discipleship. He is the kindly light that leads amid the encircling gloom we are experiencing. In open ground we need to live and preach the companionship of Jesus.

If Jesus is our companion he is our example too. Being a shepherd like Jesus takes on new resonance in open ground. Think of Jesus' compassion for the multitude, 'because they seemed to be like sheep without a shepherd' (Mk 6:34); 'Give them something to eat' (Mk 6:37). Think also of his capacity to notice the strays on the periphery and how he was drawn to them.

7 Read Timothy Radcliffe on the Last Supper in *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* p 15,16.

8 Donal Dorr, *Divine Energy, God Beyond us, within us, among us*. 1996 Gill and Macmillan p 69.

STRATEGIES IN OPEN GROUND!

We could talk all day and all night about strategies for open ground and everyone has an opinion. The solicitous want us to put on the warm clothing of prayer before venturing out. They talk of our need for a compass out there, and they are right: if we are not reading we are lost; if we are not taking time to be with Jesus we are lost; if we are not in contact with our companions of the journey, we are lost. The strategists underline the way that community magnifies effects: the impact of the faith stories of others, the company of others, the goodness of others, the service of others. The defensive among us want to strengthen the sheepfolds and the most keen among them simply want to locate the snipers with our names on their bullets. The poets among us want us to read more poetry.

The best advice I believe comes from those who tell us not to set our face backwards, like Lot's wife hankering back. By turning back she ignored the angels holding her hand and disobeyed their warnings. (Genesis 19, Wisdom 10:7) The wisdom is that we leave our hand in the grip of the angel, that we look forward and keep going.

It is good advice also that we need to loosen up in open ground. To set our camp and light our fire, as someone put it, in the wonder of open uncertainty, the beauty of tolerance and the radiance of mutual respect. It is good to realize that the people in front of us and around us are open ground people, the bereft, grieving, searching, consoling companions of open space. We stand together in the shadow of Trump Tower and the uncertainty of Brexit and the shame of our indifference to the thousand calamities that human flesh is heir to. There is something lovely in the Marist Brother motto of 'standing beside and not above', shoulder to shoulder with God's people. There is something lovely also in knowing that God will not be diminished if I live more questions than answers. Sincerity is an underestimated gift and still a better investment than all the gold that lines a Fifth Avenue skyscraper.

There is something too in Ger Loughnane's advice to the Clare hurling team: that failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker.⁹ There are a number of models of how we learn from our mistakes. An emerging model is that of the self-drive car which, because it uses the Internet, learns from the mistakes made by every other self-drive car and will not make that mistake again, nor will any of the self-drive cars born into the future.¹⁰ There is a learning model if ever there was one. An alternative model comes from FÁS, the now defunct state training agency. One contributor to the dissolution of

9 Ger Loughnane *The Irish Times* interview Dec 20, 2008

10 See Werner Herzog's new film *Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World* which examines the impact of the Internet on civilization.

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FÁS and its replacement by ‘Education and Training Boards’, was a report that showed you had a better chance of being re-employed if you didn’t do a FÁS course. These courses employed lecturers in carpentry and metal work while it was in IT and cloud computing that the new jobs were to be found. There is a line in whatever kind of ground you want to imagine, beyond which doing the old thing, even doing it harder and doing it better, is more of a waste of time than doing nothing at all.

The question I am coming to is: what kind of model of learning from our mistakes are we using as a Church? Although I am a doubting Thomas in this regard I leave it as an open question because I know and respect the good will and efforts of so many bishops and priests and parishioners around this country. But I am still remembering that woman standing up at a meeting in Kildare and Leighlin a few years ago and saying: ‘You tell me you are listening but I’d love to know how you are going to show me that I have been heard. Until that happens I won’t believe a word of it about your new-found listening’. I wonder if she has seen anything since then that helps her to believe in the unforced listening capacity of the Church. We have been hearing a lot recently about ‘elites who don’t listen’ and you’d be wondering if it is too extreme to say that the equivalent of a Trump victory or a Brexit vote, rather than being something dreadful out there in the future for faith and Church, has been happening for decades as people vote with their feet. To take an image from the Trump campaign, there may be a swamp or two in the open ground between Church and people that the Church as institution still shows little capacity either to acknowledge or to drain. Such swamps are learning points and opportunities. We have had a good many such opportunities and I ask forgiveness for thinking that we have blown every one of them.

A WAY OF TRAVELLING

It is easy to set your face backwards! It is not easy to hold on to the angel’s hand and travel without fear, treating developments simply as ‘emergences.’¹¹ Yet that is precisely what seems to be involved in following Jesus across open ground.¹² Not so much letting things go as letting things come. If I am guided by ‘let come’ as Judy Cannato puts it, ‘I find myself in the witness stance,

11 A favourite word of the great Leuven based theologian, educationalist and systemic thinker Herman Lombaerts. See *The Management and Leadership of Christian Schools: A Lasallian Systemic Viewpoint* pp 82 ff

12 The phrase ‘do not fear’ occurs 57 times in the New American Standard Bible; ‘do not be afraid’ a further 46 times. The King James Bible, which Seamus Heaney kept beside his bed, has 29 instances of the phrase ‘be not afraid.’ The Latin translation of that phrase, ‘*Noli timere*’ was the last text message Heaney sent to his wife Marie just before he died.

attentive and open to what is emerging, and therefore more able to participate in that which the incomprehensible holy mystery is communicating'¹³

In his poem, 'The Guest House', Rumi imagines being human as a guest house where every morning there is a new arrival that has been sent 'as a guide from beyond'. Rumi's advice about such guests is:

Welcome and entertain them all!
 Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
 who violently sweep your house
 empty of its furniture,
 still treat each guest honorably.
 He may be clearing you out
 For some new delight.

13 Judy Cannato, *Fields of Compassion*, Sorin Books 2010 p 124

Never a possession. For the land is described as an 'inheritance'; the community is understood to exist not just in space, but also in time. One lives in the neighbourhood, not just of those who now live 'next door,' but of the dead who have bequeathed the land to the living, and of the unborn to whom the living will in turn bequeath it. But we can have no direct behavioural connection to those who are not yet alive. The only neighbourly thing we can do for them is to preserve their inheritance: we must take care, among other things, of the land, which is never a possession, but an inheritance to the living, as it will be to the unborn.

– WENDELL BERRY, 'The Gift of Good Land', *A New Creation*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Crossroad) p.320.