British Irish Association, Sunday September 8th 2024

Readings: Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23; St Mark 7.24-30

Proverbs 22.2: *The rich and the poor have this in common; the Lord is the maker of them all …*

Proverbs is part of a body of writings within The Scriptures that speaks from what we might call basic, chunky religion. It is God observed even more than it is God assessed. This is not the intellectualized religion we have come to reject on the grounds that it does not survive the analytical stress tests we apply to the rest of our busy lives. It takes a basic, banal maxim; it lets us see how it works; it sets it alongside a number of lived norms; it lets us discern our own abject limitations; it points us in the end beyond our self- satisfactions and our self-protective mechanisms, however uncomfortable the conclusions for us, however good as people we are; and it points us to the fact that there are glaring systemic failures from which with utter predictability we walk away; and then it goes on to another basic, banal maxim. It is straightforward evidential stuff that never gives up, hoping that the slow starter will eventually get with the programme and become the quick learner. It is also visual writing rather than intellectual writing. We can see the characters behind and within the descriptions walking in front of our eyes. We can see real people walking towards us out of the abstract nouns on the page. Faced with watching the rich and the poor – then as now - what we observe in everyday life in our home place today can be viewed as being nothing other than poles apart from the text that I have quoted above:

*The rich and the poor have this in common; the Lord is the maker of them all.*

In the world in which we now live, and even more so in which our succeeding generations will live, we effectively *make ourselves* as we take chances as opportunities; this is the psychology of pervasive and instinctive personal capitalism; we craft our futures on the back of a range of smart and strategic decisions which are ours to discern and implement; the only consequence becomes our not making the decisions. This is one side of the societal coin. But then, we are not people living in tents on the streets or by canal waters; we are not young men cleared off and cleaned up, sent to live in the mountains for the inside of a week in order not to offend or dint the tourist spend in a capital city, for example, over The St Patrick’s Weekend. We are not the people whose mosque is attacked in a respectable peninsular town with no regard whatsoever for how people of faith are to react or survive or with what confidence they might return. Their Faith, of course, is not our Faith. The implication is that their freedom to worship is not our freedom to worship because they do not ‘do God,’ as they say, in the way that we ‘do God,’ or I suggest more accurately ‘did God,’ because there are fewer of ‘us’ ‘doing God’ any longer and there are more of ‘them.’ Let us remember that my own denomination The Church of Ireland has been declining year on year in Northern Ireland since 1948 and has levelled down at 2% of the population in the Republic of Ireland; and let us remember that were we to put all of those attending Church of Ireland parish churches in the thirty-two counties on a Sunday morning into The Aviva Stadium, there would still be free seats available on e-Bay: something less than 50,000 people. Public religion aside, we are the privileged and unaffected bystanders. But we are also the people graced by perspective, which some of us call God, to see that there are specific ills in our societies, that there are changes that are a reasonable expectation of political, religious and societal leadership and that scapegoating particular communities regarding the perpetration of violence and destruction, as if they themselves are the sole cause, is naïve, brutal and fruitless. It is unhelpful and unjust, superficial and irresponsible not to face the fact of what the rich and the poor, the indigenous and the immigrant, the native and the newcomer have in common: the gift of human being, the equivalence of life itself. When you have no access to services, such as housing, health and education, you can rely only on the generosity within a shared humanity or go to the wall.

So, the argument shifts and has no option but to widen. It surely depends on how you compute richness. Is richness high nett worth? Is richness justice? Are the two entitled to live separate lives in a fairly functioning, a well governed, an openly humane society – here, there or anywhere? Such a short Reading, no longer than a post on social media today, based it would seem in a throw-away truism, takes us to the core of issues that continue to beset our society. Status, money, power and policy continue to fail to respect the words of Proverbs 22.2:

*The rich and the poor have this in common; the Lord is the maker of them all.*

The Lord may indeed have made them. The caring for them is our call and cause.

Today’s Gospel Reading takes us into the territory of Tyre where no self-respecting Jewish rabbi would be seen safely. We no longer speak of unclean spirits but we do know, many of us by painful personal and parental experience, what it is for a child to be distressed and agitated perpetually by whatever need and beyond human consolation; we may even still use the word: *possessed* as a secular and post-modern borrowing from the cornucopia of the undifferentiated tradition. The *woman* is deliberately described as *a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin.* She is therefore triply excluded from access to a rabbi. So accustomed, mercifully, have we become to the equivalent status of women and men in our own society that we may even fail to notice the discrepancy in the original context between Jewish male rabbi and Gentile needy woman. There are many layers of societal uncleanness here, too many to unravel. So, they might easily go unnoticed. What happens – and it is the one occasion on which it happens with such dogged vehemence – is that the woman takes on Jesus. Her status makes this of cosmic significance.

His response to her plea for help is first and foremost segregation; there are children and there are dogs. Our domestication of dogs as pets – many of which some of us are missing even now – is no help whatsoever to us here. These dogs are not of the Tricky Woo variety. Her response is the articulation of abject detail. Just see it for a moment from her perspective: children – but not my child because she is possessed – are fun-loving, laughter-infectious and they drop crumbs or they spill food when they explode with laughter; the dogs are quick to pounce and to take their opportunity. What she is saying to Jesus is: yes I am a dog and my child is not at your table. We are given no clear hint as to how the transformation happens in the mind and in the heart of Jesus. But somehow it does. This woman is an alien. He has an ascendancy status that he has set aside for his own reasons in being born human and by becoming a roadster rabbi. Yet the connection for God, as we Christians call this person and this personal force Jesus, is that both of them are human persons. The demon has left her daughter, she is told. She leaves, travelling on the basis of belief, and one imagines leaves to the scoffing nods and winks of those who are saying: But, they say, she is going home with no evidence that she can verify! She *and* the daughter both must be crazy! What we are told is encapsulated in three verbs that could serve us well as we grapple with manufactured hatred, recreational violence, religious defilement and shabby human behaviour: went, found, gone. *So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

From the *high* ground of our influence and our privilege, from the *level* ground of our commitment and compassion, from the *under* ground of our consultation and preparation: where are we to go, what are we to find and what do we need to see gone from our societies if we are to be and to remain mature communities of inclusion, joyous communities of curiosity and functioning communities of action? It matters less what is the source of our values and more what is the sustenance of our virtues; we dig deeper for civic virtues not least because their violation tears us more brutally, harms us more viscerally, leaves us more wounded – both the violator and the violated. Values have become the more simplistic part of the argument.

A religious society never had all the answers. A secular state does not have all the answers either. We are all in this quagmire together. Integration, environment and regulation affect us all both in church and in state. They can each and all be the handmaid of society and of service. They can also all used badly become the destruction of every one of us. And even though we may not care to follow the Lord of the Reading from Proverbs, and that is our own decision, we are still faced in some shape or form with that clunky, pedestrian statement:

Proverbs 22.2: *The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.*