* Pembroke College Oxford: British Irish Association 2018
* September 09 2018 Ecumenical Service of Readings and Prayers
* Readings: Jeremiah 32.6-15; St Mark 4.3-9
* sermon preached by the archbishop of Dublin, The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson
* It is difficult to know where to begin without sounding either cross or disappointed – or both. It is not my custom to be either, nor is it my primary duty. However I do, from time to time, feel entitled – a strong word – to be dismayed. I can be dismayed by my own ignorance and incapacity in the face of the obvious. I can be dismayed by the ignorance and incapacity of others in the face of what seems to be their or, indeed, my obvious. My dismay in the particular case that I shall outline later in these musings has to do simply with what seems to the ordinary person such as myself to be the squandering of opportunities for togetherness in the face of both wilful and hapless divisiveness. Of course, I myself come upon this in my everyday work, the day job if you like. For reasons unknown to me, people frequently shy away from co-operation because of their terror of compromise or because of their preference for original stubbornness. The church world I inhabit is political generally with a small p- but there are undercurrents of hurtfulness, triumphalism, weakness, exploitation, bullying and the errors that come from sheer exhaustion in that ecclesiastical world – along with utterly impure evil. Experience has shown me that this cluster of activity is germane to human nature at its most generalized and that it is given its own patina in the things of religion. Germane also to human nature is a capacity to give to others and not to count the personal cost. In recent times chief among those undercurrents there has emerged abuse of the most horrific, unimaginable and real sorts. Nobody has any sense of how the church in its totality will emerge from this morass of inhumanity meted out by human beings towards other human beings. Nobody has any sense either of how well established it was and still is in the non-clerical sectors of society as well as in the clerical and ecclesiastical sectors.
* The ecclesiastical world I inhabit all too readily suffers from three things: the narrative of negativity; the malaise of malfunction; the victory of victimhood. In no way is this to contest that there is a powerful negative inside my own church; in no way is it to deny that there is significant malfunction inside my own church; in no way is this to deny that there are real and genuine victims of my own church. People are easily pushed to the experience of exclusion by an institution that prides itself on punching above its own weight while at the same time doing insufficient blue-sky thinking for the good of those outside its walls. As we in the Church of Ireland face into one hundred and fifty years of history since Disestablishment, we are given once again the strapline of 1870: *… free to shape our own future …* and we know that we will have to begin to do so all over again. And on Saturday August 25th we were offered this opportunity to start this type of thinking afresh by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar in his speech in Dublin Castle during the visit of Pope Francis. Even to envisage such an engagement of people of faith in the public realm as Mr Varadkar began to sketch out in a meaningful way is a massive task for a church which is a tiny minority in The Republic of Ireland and a double minority in Northern Ireland and one which in both jurisdictions has all but disappeared from any dynamic and inventive contribution to public life. The pulsating challenge to us, and the terror for us, is a move from entity to effectual non-entity. Churches are hardly ever mentioned publicly as contributing to public discourse in Ireland North and South, West and East. It is our problem, not yours, I hasten to add.
* So I start elsewhere: with the Irish Women’s Hockey Team at the Hockey World Cup. The appearance of the Irish Women’s Hockey team in the Final of the World Cup 2018 defied a Hard Brexit as it would in all likelihood affect both parts of the island of Ireland. Mercifully most sport in Ireland does so. Women from Northern Ireland played for Ireland and they played alongside women from the Republic of Ireland. They did everyone in Ireland more than proud and made history for all Irish sport by making it to the final: the first Irish sports team to make it to a World Cup Final. The very next day they all came to Dublin and told us of their experiences and their personalities, their dreams and their eccentricities. The joyfulness was infectious as they addressed a significant crowd in Dame Street which had been closed off for the occasion, just below Dublin Castle. Their achievement was irrefutable. Their togetherness was unmistakable. Their representative shared interest for Ireland was unarguable.
* A friend once passed to me a proverb: When two people fight, a third quietly profits. Rather cliché-d though it may sound, this has come often to mind in the Days of Brexit. Whether or not it will turn out, in that nail-biting and toe-curling Irish phrase, to be all right on the night or not, the run-up to Brexit has created untold confusion for the ordinary person and lasting distrust towards those who carry both the responsibilities and the privileges of statesmanship in the Political realm, this time with a capital P.
* Territory, landscape and fields, as a concept and as a reality, are shared in the language and the literature of politicians and church people. And they very quickly move in the Irish psyche from nature observed to competitive personal viciousness. Jeremiah, by himself buying a field, encourages the besieged people of Israel to make a go of an as yet unseen future, to establish themselves there, in the place that is their place and to create and build up family life rather than mourning for themselves, rather than accepting uncritically from their own hands: the narrative of negativity, the malaise of malfunction and the victory of victimhood. The Parable of The Sower, as told by Jesus and as found in three of the four Gospels, points us to the futility of sowing on inappropriate ground if what you are interested in is a fruitful harvest. The detail accorded to the negative in the parable almost obscures the positive and bountiful harvest. Perhaps the Son of God already knew all too well the attractiveness once again to latter day readers of: the narrative of negativity, the malaise of malfunction and the victory of victimhood. But then, God Incarnate was an acute observer of both human nature and political life.
* For the ordinary person, the full effects of Brexit have in all likelihood not yet sunk in. The debate, in my opinion, is being conducted at too celestial a level for people who have no option but to balance earthly budgets and weigh up earthly deprivations. While the many seek to understand, in the face of an elite who are understandably obliged to keep their cards close to their chests, the thing that will be missed most of all is the intangible togetherness caused by cultural and community capital now in danger of being eroded. Economics does indeed dominate our world; but it does not inspire as many of us as its gurus think; it is something that most of us endure and hope to survive. For a short period of twenty years in the history of an offshore cluster of islands, we have had the chance to explore and to express our cultures together in a way that had become, if I may use the word, un-Bordered. My question is this: Are we in danger of having squandered these twenty years out of carelessness and callousness combined? The security of Western Europe, with the Irish Border as the contemporary expression of the perpetual conundrum called The Irish Question, must be paramount but ought not to be paranoid over the next number of weeks and months.
* It would be charming to suggest that we are faced with a choice. The fact is that the choice has been made and we are faced with the consequences and out-workings of choice. Brexit asks of us all that we seek urgently for generosity in the egg-timer of history. Because that, in fact, is all we inhabit.