

BELFAST TO TUBBERCERRY IN LOCKDOWN

“There is a time for remembering, a time to recall

The hopes and the pleasures the fears and the falls”. Liam Lawton

For our community in Belfast March 2020 will certainly be a time to remember.

It entered quietly with all of us going about our usual ministry in parish and hospital.

In the City Hospital and Cancer Centre Life was normal as chaplains continued their ward rounds, attending to patients, supporting their families and staff. We were aware of Covid 19 through media reports and of the devastation and lockdown in China, Italy, and elsewhere, but it was still far removed from Ireland or Belfast and we hoped that it would not arrive here.

Week 2 brought some changes. Covid 19 had arrived in Ireland and there was news of restrictions being introduced in the south to restrain the spread of the virus. Then the cloud spread over Belfast and we became aware that patients in various wards were being tested for the virus. That created an atmosphere of fear among patients and staff, especially in the Cancer and Hematology wards, where patients are so vulnerable. Soon that led to restricted visiting and social distancing. Chaplaincy visits to hospital wards were restricted to emergencies, which was a great sadness to us all.

Then on Sunday 15th came the news that all church services in parish and hospitals were to be suspended, with the advice “stay at home and stay safe”. Mass was to be celebrated in closed churches, broadcast via webcam. Our weekly visits to the sick and housebound were also to be discontinued together with other parish activities. As we were reflecting on what our new normal might be, a bigger shock was in store. Our parish priest came with the advice that it would be safer for us to locate to our houses in the south, as our house was so limited in space and located in a very built up area. We had not visualized or thought of such a move. Naturally we were in shock as the difficulties and consequences of such a move flashed through our minds. Eventually we contacted Sr. Vera and it was decided that I would locate to our house Carraig Mhuire in Tubbercurry. We were advised to move sooner rather than later, as further travel restrictions were to be announced. Quick decisions were called for, in choosing what to take or leave behind in order to limit luggage and leave things in order. I contacted our hospital line manager, chaplaincy team and cancer centre staff, who promised to stay in touch and keep me connected. Here too, the situation changed within days, with the main hospital being set up as a Nightingale Centre for Covid 19 patients. Staff were changed and redeployed. The

cancer centre was closed to visitors and chaplains and those over seventy advised to stay away from the hospital. *"All is changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born"* W. B. Yeats

I was welcomed to Carraig Mhuire by Rita and Kathleen and continue to appreciate their great hospitality and support in these strange and unusual circumstances. The sudden transition from familiar surroundings and routine is difficult especially at this time, but I realize that I am blessed to be in such a lovely environment. Days are passing more quickly, with time for prayer, reflection and reading. We participate together in daily mass virtually and receive the Eucharist, which is a privilege and a blessing. I am also availing of the opportunity to improve my cooking skills as we share the preparation of meals. Long walks in the countryside are also part of my routine. Nature is at its best, "Charged with the Grandeur of God" - horse chestnut candles, copper beech, oak, ash, hawthorn, daisies, buttercups, smells of silage, turf and new mown hay. Farmers are busy, taking advantage of the lovely weather. Life seems so normal here. Bird song is all around. I was thrilled to hear the cuckoo's distinctive song, which I hadn't heard for many years. Wordsworth's poem came to mind:

"O blithe new comer, I have heard. I hear thee and rejoice.

O cuckoo shall I call you bird, or but a wandering voice"

While out walking, I sometimes meet past pupils whom I taught in the primary school over forty years ago.

I still visualize them as children. Time and years go by. Our convent is located nearby. It is great to call on the sisters there and to be inspired by how well they are coping with their new reality. Social media enables me to keep in touch with family, chaplaincy team, patients on treatment and families who have been bereaved. Our line manager keeps me up to date with developments in the hospital. So far chaplaincy visits to patients are restricted to emergencies. I also keep in touch by phone with the housebound whom I visit in the parish. Most are still in isolation, afraid to venture out. It is great to know that they are safe and well.

As lockdown restrictions are being gradually eased, I look forward in hope to getting back to Belfast and opening our house again. Hopefully we will be able to *"gather the bits of roads that were"* and move into a new normal. What its shape will be is in God's hands. Craig Larkin's reflection on *"Nazareth as a time of waiting for God's plans to take shape"* is most opportune for us all at this time.