After a long and treacherous journey full of risks and challenges; Odysseus, the eponymous hero of Homer’s epic poem wakes up unaware that he has landed back on his home island of Ithaca. It is a cold and misty morning and Odysseus who feels disorientated asks himself?

What am I in for now?

Whose country have I come to this time?

Rough savages and outlaws are they?

Or god-fearing people?

Friendly or castaways?

Many people describe experiencing a similar sense of insecurity, apprehension and disorientation in the aftermath of the referendum; and are asking similar questions:

What are we in for? Whose country is this? Are we a civilized or savage nation? What role can (god-fearing) people of faith play? Will we reach out a hand of friendship or allow ourselves to drift and dither?

Are we part of the problem or part of the solution to the troubles that cause anxiety among those of other nationalities who share this beautiful land with us?

A couple of weeks ago I received news that the son of someone I respect and care for had died in his thirties. So I did what any friend would do and called to show solidarity and offer any help that might be required.

But let me give you a bit of the back story.

This friend is the mother of five children. She happens to be Polish, having set up home in England many years ago when she married an Englishman.

She was already widowed when I first met her. She was raising her children, teaching in a secondary school and still found time to assist with the preparation of young people for confirmation.

It was she who introduced me to some of the customs and traditions of the Polish community, including the custom of the Christmas celebrations beginning with a family meal on Christmas Eve for which an empty chair was always prepared for the unexpected guest. The chair is known as Elijah’s chair; since the Hebrew people believe that Elijah is the one whose arrival prepares the way for Christ.

The next Christmas I to put this tradition to the test and arrived unannounced at the family home where, true to her word the family had gathered for a festive meal and I was immediately escorted to an empty chair and place setting.

Memories of this meal came rushing back when I made the house call to offer condolences over the death of her son. Despite the obvious sadness, there was a remarkable sense of togetherness, serenity and ordinariness. Without any fuss or the slightest hint of inconvenience it was presumed that I would stay for supper and so, as her now adult children, family and friends arrived we sat down to share an enormous lasagne.

My friend has had her share of sadness. She has had to role her sleeves up as a lone parent. At the same time she has played her part as an educationalist in high schools where her *forte* has been to provide support, motivation and meaning to the lives of many fragile and vulnerable young students.

She is not a Mumsy Mum but she has mothered with great strength, resolve and wisdom. She is not, I imagine, the easiest member of staff for school leadership to manage because she pushes the envelope when it comes to her students. She is a great home maker and advocate for the lost.

Jesus advises his disciples to tread warily as lambs among wolves, to travel without the props of security. In other words, to accept not hide their vulnerabilities. When hospitality is received they are to invoke the blessing of peace; or, if hospitality is withheld to move on unperturbed. It is for God to judge where hospitality is declined or hostility expressed. Our focus as disciples is to identify and celebrate the many ways in which God’s kingdom already exists; to be homemakers in that kingdom.

Jean Vanier, who founded a worldwide movement of homes for those made vulnerable by disability, wrote:

“A community which refuses to welcome – whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors – is dying spiritually.” This is the question faced by our country today.

On the other hand he wrote “Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren’t afraid, that we have a treasure and truth to share.”

I think we all know which kind of community we would hope to be part of.

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