

Some reflections concerning the seemingly insoluble problem of the Irish border

The split between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland came about in 1922 in no small measure as the result of the historic, high-handed attitude of the British elite and its need to protect its interests in the north of the country. We can trace this in part to Henry VIII's concern that the population in Ireland was becoming a threat to his break with Rome as a result of the rising number of Catholics, so he sneakily introduced Protestants 'planters' who would confiscate land from existing landowners, through force or by stealth, in order to counterbalance the religious make-up.

The indigenous Catholics who were generally poor were considered inferior and this eventually led to an 'apartheid' situation which has to some extent carried on to this day. The person who sent me this section believes that In God's eyes He does not see Ireland in terms of 'north' and 'south' but rather as a whole land.

At some point in time, God addresses injustices head on with a view to putting them right. Many injustices have been committed in Ireland, leading to enmity on both sides. But God loves putting injustices right! Whilst praying about this situation, which I have been doing a great deal since returning from ministering there recently, I saw God's hands cupped around the whole of Ireland, in a protective gesture. I found myself asking the question, that rather than being the problem, could Brexit be a major step along the way by which the Lord begins to restore this island's true identity? It is written into the Good Friday Agreement that the UK government would not interfere if there is enough desire from both north and south to reunite. The DUP, the largest party, certainly has no desire to do so, but the influence of Sinn Fein is steadily growing, not least as the result of the increasing number of Catholics over the last few decades (who still tend to have more children).

I also heard the words 'set apart'. What does this mean? Is it Northern Ireland that is 'set apart?' Or, on the contrary, is He intending to re-establish Ireland as a single nation again? These are reasonable questions to ask, even though they are fraught with difficulties and hardship for hard-line loyalists. Opinion polls most certainly reveal that a very high percentage of people in Northern Ireland do not appear to be in favour of such a union.

In fact, the attachment of Northern Irish Unionists to Great Britain has historically been a major pressure group, used to keep its 'enemy' at bay – almost, one feels, a religion in itself, in fact. Theresa May declared firmly, 'I will not let the EU divide our country and break up the Union'. When she said that was she taking a proper stand? Or merely offering reassurance, knowing how dependent she is on the support of DUP MPs? Or was she in fact somehow speaking out of turn? After all, it is not 'our' country - it is the Lord's. So is it not for Him to decide its proper shape? This will seem a very unpatriotic thing to say amongst those of right-wing Christian persuasion, but it is a question I can't put out of my mind.

The person who wrote these thoughts has been feeling this matter as an intense burden since returning from that country. As always she is concerned to weigh between soul and spirit, but she does think there is Spirit leading in her concern. It is interesting that more than a quarter of people are reported as saying said that the UK's decision to leave the EU has made them more likely to vote for a united Ireland [presumably in the longer run?]. . . Fewer

people in Northern Ireland think of themselves as British than in any other UK region. Just 46.7% see themselves as being British, compared to 58.6% who call themselves Irish. Source; <http://www.thejournal.ie/united-ireland-poll-3-4059433-Jun2018/>

What is best, then, in the long run? Here indeed is food for thought and ammunition to pray for – albeit within the awareness of the intense depths of suspicion and even hatred that still lie so perilously close below the surface in all too many hearts on both sides of the divide.