

Hope Lost, Hope Found, Hope Sustained and Hope Shared

The author explores the links between contemporary migration and the early migrations of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

'Cynicism and the crisis of boredom are closely related to the crisis of trust in public institutions. This is not a country colonel's point about respect for authority and sense of public duty. It's about not trusting public institutions to deliver. Ultimately, it's about having nothing to believe in.'

THE DEATH OF SPIN, G. PITCHER

One common thread in all emigrants' journeys is the presence of hope, of something to believe in, something that gives a person and those who love that person a sense of worth. The roots of hope can be at variance for the many millions who emigrate worldwide. Hope can be focused on the future; looking ahead to new possibilities. Hope can also be born of a dreadful set of circumstances that propel a person from a place of social, economic or domestic destitution. Even though the short term focus of an emigrant is often a job or good accommodation, they are ultimately seeking something to believe in.

Those who board planes for Perth, Abu Dhabi or Chicago from airports in Ireland are alive with the hope that new opportunities present. The thought of what lies ahead may make them slightly apprehensive but nevertheless they carry suitcases or backpacks full of hope. Some political commentators might suggest that emigration is a wonderful opportunity; that it's all about new opportunity and possibility... and so it is... if freely chosen. These commentators might need to remember that migration is the oldest and well tested reaction to poverty.

In Ireland Christmas is a time when families gather together. If people can't make it to a parent's home on Christmas day, they make sure that they'll visit prior to the day itself. It is over these days that the 'absence' of those who are away is felt most acutely. Again commentators who try to rationalise away the pain suggest that this modern age provides us with more opportunities to stay in touch. Skyping, phoning, texting and visiting are more accessible and available, however these new opportunities bring

with it more and more good-byes, reinforcing the drama and reality of loss. The goodbyes tell that a high price is paid today for economic and social stability in the lives of those who seek it abroad. The cost of emigration is often not felt until years after the decision to go is taken when the price of distance is seen through the lens of sickness or loss. This cost underlines the importance of one of the first principles of emigration; people have a right **not** to emigrate, they have a right to a future on their own doorstep and have a right not to be forced to embrace a future on some far flung shore.

The nativity narratives are a story of forced migrations similar in tone and content to contemporary migrations. The family unit of Joseph, Mary and the young baby Jesus is the story of people who are forced to relocate for various reasons and circumstances:

- A foreign occupying administration takes no mercy on a mother with child and the family are forced to go to their home place to register. This journey is similar to the journey of hope faced daily by many refugees. They are forced to leave their home to register their status in a new location in the hope that this will allow them to carve a new future for themselves and their family.
- A child is born in Bethlehem, the child has no address. Neither does he belong, other than to his father and mother. Today twenty three per cent of all children born in the United States are the children of immigrants, many of whom are illegal. Many countries throughout the developed world including Ireland are happy to reap the reward of illegal work-forces without granting them the benefit of stability and security.
- Fearing death and destruction, the family leaves home overnight, fleeing to Egypt to protect their new child. They travelled together and stayed together as a family. The support of the basic family unit is not available to an increasing number of minors. Between 2000

and 2010 510 children who arrived in Ireland as unaccompanied minors have gone missing from State care.

- The family after years in exile return to Nazareth where they set up home. Returning is never easy. People can prepare for their departure but they seldom prepare for their return. They are left juggling sameness and difference: the sameness of the environment they return to and the differences that have occurred in them as a result of living abroad for a number of years. A recent report revealed returning emigrants were told things like, 'You don't fully belong here, and you're not a real Irish person, because you didn't stick it out when the ship was sinking.'

The journey of the Holy Family can be shrouded in romantic nostalgia but make no mistake it was tough and it represents the challenges faced by many migrants today. Apart from the physical elements mentioned in the story, the emotional and spiritual turmoil was immense. The qualities that Mary and Joseph brought to the situation are presented to us through the eyes and hearts of the communities who compiled the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Faced with all these decisions Luke describes Mary as one who pondered everything in her heart. She trusted that all would be well despite unpredictable circumstances. Hope's only existence in a world that had collapsed into uncertainty was within. Joseph on the other hand observed and interpreted. His experience as a Jew who listened to the Rabbis in the synagogue helped him to realise that God's presence unfolds in the meanderings of the human journey. When they lost hope they found it again; this wonderful interpersonal dynamic was a living church sustaining and sharing hope.

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