

A little over two months ago, Sarah and I, along with her brother, were standing in the Cathedral Church of St. Anne in Belfast, Northern Ireland. To this day, the island in the North Atlantic, just to the west of Great Britain, is split into two different countries: the Republic of Ireland to the south and Northern Ireland, still under British rule. The Emerald Isle hasn't been that way even for a century yet, but in the last one hundred years or so, there has been traumatizing violence as with many nations throughout the world, including in Belfast.

It just so happened, that when we were standing in that beautiful cathedral, it was nearly forty years to the day when the Irish Republican Army, a terrorist group that was born out of the Irish independence movement to the south, went underground to the north and, eventually, unleashed twenty bombs against British military personnel, not to mention civilians as well. The sheer terror left nine dead with 130 injured; what will always be known in Belfast as Bloody Friday.

At that time, the Cathedral Church of St. Anne's had not yet finished complete construction, even though it started back in 1899. It is no where near as old as St. Patrick's in Dublin, that is well over 800 years of age. And yet,

St. Anne's has its fair share of beauty, to say the least. There is a mosaic of the Creation above their baptismal font with 150,000 colored pieces of glass that took seven years for two women to complete. Standing tall in the sanctuary are ten pillars with symbolic etchings of the life and culture of Belfast.

There's, also, a memorial above the west door, recognizing the men in their choir who died during World War I. However, the most engaging work of art in the entire sanctuary, actually, lies right under your feet.

There is this maze that was created in the marble floor, a labyrinth setup, to depict our faith journey, in a sense, with one line that leads to the altar up-front, and another darker line that leads no where; it is meant to symbolize sin. Now, of course, this would be a perfect opportunity for the preacher to get back to the fire-and-brimstone style "most uplifting" sermons, that were just as prominent in Ireland in centuries past as they were here, to further convince those in the pews to repent of their evil ways, or else, be prepared for an eternity in a fiery hell. Except, what I was more taken aback, appreciative, even captivated by, was that the darker line was not carved into the floor to go out the door entirely. Instead, the line, the sin, the humanity, was kept inside, as if even the cathedral architecture was not proclaiming eternal damnation,

but its own subtle and powerful form of relentless grace: that you are allowed to bring your sin, into this sanctuary. You are allowed to be imperfect. This cathedral, no matter how masterful its art, no matter how perfect it may seem, will not be made any less beautiful if you walk in with all your struggles, with all your regrets, with all your mistakes that you cannot begin to list out in any confession throughout the world. Regardless, you are welcome, not just into some goliath of a building. You are welcome into the inner sanctum of God's very own heart in Jesus Christ. There is nothing you can do that will make God escort you out from that boundless divine grace.

And so today, we will pray for the healing of the nations, including for many countries that we do not share the best of relations with, some of whom we wish God would escort out entirely from existence, if we would be completely honest with ourselves, taken out into a fiery pit altogether. Except, we pray to a God of mercy and compassion and a love that we oftentimes wish did not extend quite so far. We pray to a God who cherishes each of the nations equally, no matter how proud we may be of our own. We pray to the God who desires peace and happiness and joy for all of God's precious children throughout the entire world.

To this day in Belfast, there stand these walls that were erected when the tensions rose between the British and the Irish Republican Army, oftentimes leading to outright conflict between Irish Catholics and Protestants in the streets. Walls were put up with the idea that it was the only way to instill some sense of peace in Northern Ireland that saw over 3,000 lives ripped away over the years. The walls still stand, yes, as a major tourist attraction with murals painted depicting hope in silencing the terror that reigned, as beautiful as any work of art inside a cathedral. Most importantly, however, are the gates that have been opened for Catholics and Protestants to live, work and play together.

We cling to the God who continues to work in such places, including our own homes, to remind us in no uncertain terms that we will never be ushered out, onto some other side of a gate or wall or even a church building door. We have already been brought into the eternal fold of God's love, and no matter the darkness that attempts to take over our life, God will never let us out. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed!

Amen!