

Dipping into Hope

An extract from *Dipping into Hope* by Alan Hilliard, forthcoming from Messenger Publications, €14.95.

Geese

Nature can be one of our finest teachers, if we'd care to listen. Every year I spot the arrival of the Brent geese. Having flown more than four thousand miles from Canada, stopping off at Iceland along the way, they spend their winter in places that are easier to live in.

Geese have an incredible moral and physical compass, which assists them on their journey from Canada. For instance, their 'V' formation allows for shared leadership and energy conservation – the one out front will drop back, allowing others to take the lead.

Their constant honking reminds those leading the flock that they haven't lost those who follow behind. Scholarship reveals that when creatures like geese migrate they don't adopt the casual Irish attitude of 'Ah, sure lads, we'll see how it goes.' They stick to a direct flight path, without veering left or right for the goose equivalent of a quick pint, a party or having the craic! Any stop on the route is purposely designed to further the journey's progress. Detours,



if they are made, are taken if the weather takes a turn for the worse.

Recently I was reading a book about leadership by Hubert Joly. Reflecting on his most successful ventures he identifies two essential ingredients of leadership. Ironically these appear to be in the genetic code of geese. The elements are purpose and connection.

There is no doubt that life can be difficult if we have lost our purpose. I recall the words of a wise man who once upon a time encouraged us to 'look at the birds of the air'. If we find it difficult to take direction from the wisdom of our Christian traditions, perhaps we can look to the geese for similar inspiration.



Photograph: Brendan McCarthy

Lament

A good traditional Irish music session can have you rocking and tapping with the rhythms that reverberate around the room. Tunes can be so contagious that dancers take to floor. However, a good session can also shift the emotional mood in moments when a musician shares what is known as a 'slow air'. Silence descends, other musicians fold up their instruments, bow their heads and breathe in the moment. Even if the session is in a pub, the glasses stop clinking. The few strangers, not accustomed to the ritual, are hushed and they take the direction well.

A slow air often connects with a memory, a person or a moment that

the musician wants to hold on to for ever. Some who sit alongside know that story well and so the respect and the soul connection with both player and music are profound and religious. The tune may even acknowledge the unspoken sadness and brokenness of people's hearts in the present moment when the rage about difficult life situations lies beyond what words can express.

Laments are necessary. We could spend our lives trying to be rock-and-roll kids or keep raving on but there is a need to stop and capture moments of sadness. The Psalms are particularly good at this. Out of the 150 psalms, there are forty-two individual laments and sixteen expressing the lament of communities. A line from one is 'My soul is in anguish. How long, Lord, how long?'

Our human journey needs to name and be aware of the multitude of feelings and emotions that can take hold of our souls at any point in time. It may be easy to share the good ones and neglect the need to lament, but they only build up into something worse. Loss, grief and sadness are as real as joy, gratitude and happiness, but they may be more difficult to express. Thank God for the slow air and the Psalms, which allow us to capture these moments.

The Psalms also tell us we are not on our own in these difficult moments; furthermore, lament tells of a disoriented people calling out for a deeper and more wholesome reorientation of life. Slow airs don't last for ever, and the session eventually finds its way back to the jigs, hornpipes and reels that can have us tapping once again.