

Diarmuid Scully

What it means has changed a lot in the last few years and I think what it always meant was – it was a statue – it was the statue – it was the place – and everyone I think who you've asked this question of has quoted the song 'the stink on Patrick's Bridge is wicked, how does Fr Mathew stick it'. But its changed a lot really recently now – I mean this is the decade of centenaries and commemorations. I'm interested in the First World War – military history and one thing that is really noticeable is that this is one of the very cities where the main statue, the main public commemoration is for somebody dedicated to peace. You compare it with what it's matched with at the other end of Cork, is the National monument and the cenotaph of the Great War. Those are important commemorations but I think it's a really good thing that this city is not dominated by war. And this is something that I begun to realise only very very recently and what a very positive thing it is to have somebody like that commemorated in such a central position in town.

Q: And do you think it means anything to the modern generation?

A: I think until a year ago or so I would have said it didn't mean anything. I would have been surprised if you said people didn't know what it was though I think there are plenty of people who don't in retrospect, talking to yourself. But what has changed in the last year or two would be in a very indirect way – I have students who study English and are interested in politics as well and were very interested in the narratives of Frederick Douglas – interest in the anti-slavery movement in the States. So I knew he came here – came to Cork and read about it a bit myself and there was Fr Mathew and the man came to life. So you're suddenly seeing that this man was a tremendous force for good. He was ecumenical, he's a social reformer, he's standing up in an age of institutional racism, for freedom. So that is something I didn't know about and I learned about it in an indirect way though some of my students. So these are young guys – 18,19 20 – so I think there is actually, at least in some places, there's a re-emergence of a knowledge about him and from a very unexpected angle as well.

Q: Now you're a medievalist so statues, iconography, all that is part of your daily life. Why do we celebrate statues? Is it important to celebrate a statue? Does it have a message for future generation?

A: Think about it. Think about where the cenotaph is now and wasn't on the corner there a statue of one of the George's – King George of England – what is it 'Look out for Ireland King George of England' – I think it was possibly him. That ended up in the river didn't it? So that tells you if you want to know whether statues are important enough that they are if people go to the habit of destroying them. So to have a statue of somebody in the most prominent place in Patrick's Street - and there he is talking – you can see he's addressing – he's giving a speech. What's he doing, even to ask that question, **he's somebody with a message and we're commemorating and just look at the next several years, next ten years is going to be commemorations of war and rebellion and revolution and killing, so much of that and here is a Statue for somebody who was a tremendous force for good. So to commemorate him is I think an incredibly valuable thing.** And especially you look at this particular year, you look at the results of the European elections; you look at the emergence of seriously nasty people – you know – racism, whether openly acknowledged or not seems to me to be clearly on the rise and you go back – you go back to the 1840s. that particular period and you're seeing somebody in a sectarian age who's ecumenical; in an age of institutional racism where there was still slavery in America, somebody who was associating standing up for

freedom. So the idea that that man was associated primarily with this city is something tremendous. I think it should be commemorated.