

Welcome sales boost after difficult times

THE sales start today, in traditional shops and online, and it is forecast that we will spend more than €1 billion in the coming days, the largest amount since 2008. It is a good sign the recovery truly is under way, and very welcome news indeed for the retail sector, which was a serious casualty of the economic crash.

Meanwhile, the motor industry is forecasting sales next year of over 150,000 cars. In 2009, the year after the recession began in earnest, total sales were under 58,000 and thousands of jobs were lost.

Now, employment is picking up again. Empty shops on the main streets of our cities and towns are springing back to life, often being occupied by small, privately owned businesses and artisan food and craft shops.

The big supermarkets increasingly source Irish food for their shelves, not just for sale here but also in their home markets of the UK and Germany, and the vibrant agriculture and fisheries sector contributes massively not just to the economy but also to our image abroad.

And with tourism figures predicted to rise again next year, not least because of a certain island off the Kerry coast that steals the show in the new Star Wars film, the prospects for the hospitality sector look bright as well.

Yesterday, thousands of families sat at tables where loved ones were absent because of the scourge of emigration. Many got to wave at their children and grandchildren, thousands of kilometres away, only on Skype.

And that's why the recovery is so important, and why the sales predictions are an encouraging sign. If we are ever to bring back all those who have left, a functioning economy is vital. The road to this point has been hard, but the destination is in sight. We don't need another credit-fuelled boom that will ultimately turn to bust, but a flutter in the sales won't do us any harm!

Homeless need help

OF course, the rising tide is not lifting all boats. Yesterday, the RDS hosted hundreds of homeless people for dinner, and more of the less fortunate were fed in cities and towns across the country.

The Government did some good work this year by opening more temporary beds than ever before, though progress on building new social housing has been slow and the result of the rent control plan has been that rents have increased in advance of the new rules.

Realistically, the homelessness problem is going to get worse before it gets better, and the gap between rich and poor has never been wider. At the start of austerity, we were told we would all share the pain, but that hasn't been the case. New taxes and charges have hit those at the bottom of the ladder hardest.

With the general election looming early in 2016, we need to ask serious questions of ourselves. What sort of society do we want – one where the recovering economy is used for the benefit of everyone, or just for the chosen few?

Stars lit up capital

IT was heartwarming to see videos circulating yesterday featuring Bono, The Script, Glen Hansard, Ronan Keating, Hozier, Imelda May and more busking on Dublin's Grafton Street for the homelessness charity Simon.

Of course, the homeless should not have to rely on charity, but the stark fact is they often do, and the annual appearance on the street of some of our biggest stars raises awareness as well as cash.

It is all too easy to be cynical about such high-profile events, but it was an impressive display of the huge talent this country has produced, and of the values we still hold dear and which we must struggle to preserve.

CHRISTMAS Day is over but the real festivities have just begun. For the next week, the country shall make merry, rest and be at peace. In so many ways, the week between Christmas and New Year's Day is the most wonderful of all.

St Stephen's Day is named after the first Christian martyr, a young man who was stoned to death for his faith. It is strange that we should celebrate such a feast straight after Christmas. That we do so is a reminder of the miracle of Christmas, of how it can raise people from the depths to the heights.

Today, the true miracle of Christmas begins.

The frenzy is over, the streets are calm and life is now moving to a quiet rhythm.

No more rushing, no more panic-buying and no more stress.

For this one week of the year, people seem to take stock of life. It is as though the world comes to a stop, that it somehow ceases to turn. Everything is put on hold as we savour the things that truly matter.

That is why this day has always been a highlight of my year.

Beautiful as it is, Christmas Day inevitably brings its own pressures. There is the high-octane excitement of Santa, Christmas worship, preparing the feast, the clean-up and all of that while trying to remain composed and cheerful.

St Stephen's Day is, however, a different story.

It is a day to visit family and friends, a day when the celebrations continue with more meals and parties. However, there is less pressure to perform and to be at our best. The children are busy with their toys, laughing and playing through the morning. The fridge is full and there is no panic to get up and go. It is a gentle day when we enter the true Christmas spirit and enjoy life for all it is worth.

FOR most of us, it is the first time we get to really relax at Christmas. The first time we get a chance to read our new book, watch a festive film with the family or simply go for a leisurely walk. It is the first of many days when we can be totally ourselves.

The true miracle of Christmas is that we are given time to be ourselves. For one week, the normal tempo gives way to a more even pace where people take centre stage. For one week, nothing seems to matter except those by our side.

Some say it is a sleepy time, but I find that it is the one week of the year when we are most awake and alive. It is true that the streets are asleep, that the regular hustle and bustle has died away. At home, however, we seem to be more mindful of those we love.

It is family time, a time when we can be with each other without having to worry about bills and chores, meetings and work. As they stroll through the streets

Why today begins the pilgrimage to the homeland of the heart

Giving families and friends a brief reprieve to relax and rejoice in each other's love, St Stephen's Day is far more special to me than the frenzy of Christmas Day

**SATURDAY
ESSAY**



by Mark
Dooley

in their new clothes, the children on their bikes or scooters, you notice that they all smile. Fathers and mothers, who are normally so preoccupied, hold hands as they gaze adoringly at their little ones.

They are going nowhere in particular. Time has ceased to tick and the demands of life can wait. For what matters now is that they are sharing this moment together, that they are completely alive to one another.

Looking back, some of the happiest moments of my childhood occurred during this week. St Stephen's Day heralded a time of simple joy, a week when not even the news could intrude.

As a boy, I remember thinking that nothing seemed to happen at this time of year, and that life would be so much better if we lived like this all the time. Indeed,

yet another astonishing feature is that we completely lose track of time. At no other time of the year do we refer to the days as the 27th or the 28th. We not only want to take time off, but to live without it for a while. Living without time, measuring our days only by the light of the sun, we come to live as we should. My grandfather used to say that life slows down for a week every year. And when life slows down, we come to see how futile it can be to speed along in the fast lane.

Light and candles glow from the windows of every abode. People appear happier and even the air seems somewhat lighter and fresher. That is why so many pilgrims long to come home for Christmas.

What makes it so special is that, for this one week, home comes into its own. At any other

time of the year, those at home would be laden down with all the daily duties. At this time, however, they are present and alive to the moment. Home roots and binds us to what makes life worth living. It is not so much a place as an experience. It is the experience of simply being with those you could not be without.

IT is the experience of sharing with them carefree days beside the tree. It is the experience of taking time over lunch and dinner, of recalling the ghosts of Christmas past and savouring the beauty of Christmas present. It is the experience of not having to rush here or there, but of lingering by the fire as though time did not exist. That experience is one that we all long for throughout the entire course of the year. We yearn to stop, breathe and enjoy what we have while we still have it. St Stephen's Day opens up a week in which we can journey to this homeland of the heart.

That journey is one which we must all inevitably take. Sooner



Fun: Families get time together after all the milling about

or later, we are reminded of the things without which no human life is fulfilled. Family, home and the peace which they provide, are, in the end, those things that nourish the heart like nothing else.

If this coming week makes good on the miracle of Christmas, it is because we all need to come home. In our world of speed, where few people slow down long enough even to eat, we must have a set time when we stop, sit and simply be. These days give us that opportunity, an opportunity to stop running and start living.

And when, at journey's end, we glance back across our lives, it is to such moments that we shall be drawn.

My clearest memories are of being at home during this precious week. I remember the friends who came calling and my grandfather spilling a discreet tear as we watched a Christmas movie.

I recall the scent of burning turf, sweet sherry and that unmistakable taste of Christmas pudding that my grandmother made in October. I look back longingly to those days when I

was surrounded by those who were such a feature of Christmas, but who have since departed this world. I remember the tinsel and the tree, the long hours chatting about nothing and the peace that I never wanted to pass.

Lasting memories are made during days such as these. That is why Christmas can be so difficult for many. Recalling the joy and peace of past Christmases surrounded by our loved ones, we mourn them even more.

In the days ahead, people rise with the better angels of their nature. Somehow, we see each other in a different light – one that glows from within. Unburdened of our stresses and strains, we give ourselves to one another simply by being there to talk, to share a drink, to take life just as we find it.

It is only a week, but its effect can last the whole year long. I cannot remember every detail of what happened in 2015, but I vividly recall every moment of these beautiful days last year. I remember the ripple of excitement that coursed through the house each time our boys heard the doorbell. Keeping Christmas all year round means trying to keep that

excitement alive. That is not easy as the year grinds on. However, this week provides us with memories of what it can be like when we open our homes and our hearts.

If it is so hard to begin again in January, it is not because we have nothing to look forward to.

Life is full of surprises and there is always something on the horizon to celebrate.

January is a struggle because we must return to 'normal' having just experienced the best in ourselves and in others.

WE cannot experience that when we are without peace. Fatigue and stress deny us that peace which surpasses all understanding. When, however, those clouds disperse and the light of Christmas shines, we shine even brighter.

Very soon, life will return to normal. The lights will go out in our homes as the trees are dismantled and bad news rushes in to fill the aching vacuum. The

Christmas pilgrims will head away once more and the children will return to school.

If, however, we live this week well, if we are open to the full potential of Christmas, we will come to realise that these precious days are not a deviation from normality.

In giving us the opportunity to step back from the daily grind, and to forget about time, they enable us to live more wholesomely than we would normally.

We come to realise that this is how life ought to be, and indeed how it can be if we strive to keep Christmas throughout the year.

On this, St Stephen's Day, we begin that beautiful pilgrimage to the homeland of the heart. We do so simply by being with family and friends, sharing all the joys of life without fuss or worry. On this day, we see the power of Christmas to fulfil our deepest longings and to show us why human life is completed only in love.

To experience that is to have witnessed the miracle of Christmas, a miracle that lasts only a week, but which has the power to change us forever.

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