



"Take me anywhere except to the seaside," a colleague based on an offshore island used to joke many years ago. I thought of that line as I was arranging annual holidays, almost a year since returning to be close to the sea in Carna.

Twenty five of my 40 years as a priest have been spent close to the Irish coastline, the other 15 fairly near to the shore of Lough Mask, in Tourmakeady.

Closeness to the water gives a particular resonance to gospel stories about Jesus and his fishermen apostles, about storms and dangers on the water, as well as of quieter moments: "Near restful waters he leads me to revive my drooping spirit."

It has taken me a while to adapt again to the vagaries of the sea, to the ebb and flow of tides, to moods of quiet repose broken by flurries of wild waves, to white horses on the surface and waves breaking on the shore.

I have enjoyed reacquainting myself with the fresh smells of spring as I walk along seaweed strewn beaches, smells which take me back instantly to early days in the smaller islands of Aran. It was a time when I had the energy as well as the luxury of walking right around my part of the parish in a single day.

Waves breaking white in the distance caught my glance on a recent Sunday morning. They had probably been there the previous day too, but I had not noticed. I asked myself: "Have I begun to take the sea for granted? Will I soon find myself walking by without noticing it?"

Having lived in so many beautiful places in Counties Galway and Mayo, the last thing I want is to lose that sense of awe and admiration that each bend of the road, each casual glance towards the horizon can bring.

Looking out across the lowlying area from the Twelve Bens to the sea, it has occurred to me that a tsunami such as that which followed the recent Japanese earthquake could cause devastation in this part of the country.

This is not as far-fetched an idea as it might seem as the tsunami that followed the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 swept into Galway Bay and actually damaged Galway's Spanish Arch as well as killing people.

In the 1850s 15 men were washed off the cliffs in Inis Mór in the Aran Islands while fishing at least a hundred feet above sea level. I have no idea if this was caused by an earthquake, but the wave could have come across the Atlantic or from the Caribbean.

I suppose anything can happen but the good news is that people have survived in harsh conditions along our coasts for many centuries.

As I watched some helicopter shots of the Golden Vale as Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip were being ferried from the Rock of Cashel to Cork recently I could only marvel at the land and the landscape.

What a contrast the great big green fields are to the land in this part of the country. It occurred to me that if I had a horse and a plough the only field in the parish big enough, level enough or

rock-free enough to plough is the football pitch.

Don't worry, I have no intention of setting my spuds there. I am just pointing out the contrasts in terms of land inside the island of Ireland. Despite the terrain people still survived and thrived, especially in terms of culture, language, music and dance. And they have the sea. Take me anywhere as long as it has a shoreline.