

Fr. Tom Beirne. Funeral Mass Homily: 22nd July 2016.

Introduction: I begin by expressing a genuine sympathy to all of Fr. Tom's family relatives: Nieces, nephews and their extended families. To all his parishoners in Newbridge, Toghergar and Ballygar. In particular, I offer sympathy to Ann Murray, Pat Lohan, John Doyle, Kathleen Cunningham and his loyal carers and to all people from other parishes where Fr. Tom served so faithfully. To Bishops Kevin and Christy and all the priest colleagues of Elphin diocese, to priests from the neighbouring Dioceses of Tuam and Galway and priests from St. Patrick's Missionary Society in Kiltegan, as Tom began his priesthood by continuing a long, missionary tradition of Elphin Diocese, in volunteering to generously serve for nine years in Ogoja dioceses in Nigeria, a very sincere word of sympathy to you all on this sad occasion and also for the countless people whose lives Fr. Tom influenced, as they encountered and were blessed by his unique qualities of friendship and presence.

We gather this afternoon to carry and hold Fr. Tom in the prayer, presence and communion of our affection, esteem, respect and indeed our love for him. People had such a profound regard for Tom, such was his noble character of genuine sincerity. Our funeral Mass for him today is a reminder that because he is immensely precious in the eyes of God, we can pray for Tom in sure and certain hope that he is in God's eternal safe keeping.

We bring all the stories of family, people, places, parishes, communities, events and experiences that link Fr. Tom to so many of us gathered here for his funeral Mass.

Tom died last Tuesday and the reading for Mass that day was from the Prophet Micah, who asked the question: *What God can compare with you: taking fault away, but delighting in showing mercy...? Grant Jacob your faithfulness and Abraham your mercy...as you swore from the days of long ago.*

An apt reference to a double expression of God's mercy in this Year of Mercy. It is appropriate that the reading for the daily Mass today, as distinct from today's feast of St. Mary Magdalene is from the Prophet Jeremiah, who reminds us what the Lord says: *I will give you shepherds after my own heart, and these shall feed you on knowledge and discretion....*

Tom was a true shepherd after the Lord's own heart, in that '**wide tent**', to use the image from today's reading from Isaiah, that he spread for others from his first appointment as a priest in Nigeria to his last appointment here in Newbridge. Tom always stretched the tent pegs of his heart to include and welcome others.....

Now in firmly shared hope, with Tom, that the Lord, in whom he kept his trust to the end, has brought him now to the *peace* of today's Gospel: *Jesus came and stood among them. Peace be with you*, where St. Thomas then touches the wounds on the body of the Risen Lord and exclaims a moving profession of faith that is an integral part of the rich heritage of our own Irish faith tradition: "*My Lord and my God...*" 'Mo Thíarna agus Mo Dhía'...

Fr. Tom was a man of profound faith in the presence of the Risen Lord and was in communion with that presence for the sixty five years of his priestly life and ministry,

as he celebrated the sacraments and touched the wounds of the frail, the infirm and the dying with the fragrance of the anointing presence of the Risen Lord. We pray Tom into that unimaginable space where departure can become arrival.

St. Thomas has received from the Risen Lord, and has in turn transmitted to the Church, the gift of faith, put to the test by the passion, suffering and death of Jesus and confirmed by meeting him risen. St. Thomas put down his own conditions for believing...*Unless I see the wounds, I refuse to believe...* His own faith was almost dead, but was revived, born again, thanks to his touching the wounds of Christ, those wounds that the Risen Lord did not hide, but showed, and continues to point out to us in the trials and suffering of every human being across our world...from Nigeria, to Nice and to Newbridge.

Yes, we can all be tempted by the disbelief of St. Thomas. Suffering, evil, injustice, death, especially when it strikes the innocent such as children who are victims of war and terrorism, of sickness and hunger, does not all this put our faith to the test? Paradoxically, the disbelief of St. Thomas is most valuable to us in these cases because it helps us to purify and crystallise all our false concepts of God and leads us to discover his true face: the face of a God, who Christ has taken upon himself, the scars and wounds of injured, suffering humanity.

Only a God who loves us to the extent of taking upon himself our wounds and our pain, especially innocent suffering is worthy of our faith. The wounds that Christ has received for love of us, helps us to understand who God is, as we borrow the words of St. Thomas:

‘MY LORD AND MY GOD’.
‘Mo Thíarna Agus Mo Dhía’.

Fr. Tom Beirne spent his entire priestly life searching for and befriending the wounded and the lost, bringing back the stray and making the weak strong by his quiet witness and his daily dialogue with the Risen Lord.

It is not ourselves that we are proclaiming, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants. These words open the Second Reading from St. Paul and Fr. Tom's sole focus was always on the Lord's presence, especially when he celebrated Mass for whatever occasion or intention.

Last December we celebrated Tom's 90th birthday. We had some subtle persuading to convince him to join us in celebrating and having a meal. Tom came and enjoyed being guest of honour. Incidentally, Fr. John Leogue led us in accompanying us on the piano and singing Happy Birthday to Tom. Hopefully, they will meet in the many rooms of the Father's house.....

Every birthday we remember that we are one year older, one more candle on the cake. But at Christmas we do not celebrate the immense age of Jesus with a vast cake. He is always Emmanuel, *God-with-us*, newborn, fresh and just beginning. St. Augustine says that ‘*God is younger than all else,*’ We have grown old, but God remains forever younger than us.

At every Baptism that we priests and deacons celebrate with families, we can always say that humanity and the Church have a future that is in God's hands.

In the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, there is this line: *'I will give a white stone, with a new name written on the stone, which no one knows, except the one who receives it'* (2:7).

It sounds mysterious, but the thrust is clear. Finally, in God we will discover who we are. Our true identity is to be discovered in Christ. When we were named at baptism, it is to invite us to enter into a dialogue of conversation with God and all his friends, in which it will eventually be disclosed who we are called to be. It is the journey, a pilgrimage of a life time.

Fr. Tom, may the Lord who, in the words of today's reading from St. Paul, said: *'Let there be light shining out of darkness', that has shone into our hearts to enlighten them with the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ...* may this same Lord, whom Tom faithfully served in his people and whom he never doubted his words of eternal promise, may He now carry you, Tom, safely over 'the dark threshold' and welcome you into the spacious tent of the abundant hospitality and mercy of his heavenly kingdom. With the disciples in today's Gospel, may Tom who in his own way was a faithful disciple, be able to join with them and say:

WE HAVE SEEN THE LORD.

It is the same with Mary Magdalen, whose feast we mark today, where the Gospel of the feast ends with these words: *So Mary of Magdala went and told the disciples that SHE HAD SEEN THE LORD.*

May Fr. Tom be welcomed in an eternal embrace of love in today's Gospel words of the Risen Lord: PEACE BE WITH YOU.

Fragments of God's nourishing Word from today's Funeral Mass:

Isaiah: 54, 2-10.

Do not be afraid.

Yahweh has called you back
in great and everlasting love.
Yahweh has mercy on you.

St. Paul. 2 Cor: 4, 5-8.

It is not ourselves that we are proclaiming,
but Christ Jesus as Lord.
But we hold a treasure in earthenware jars,
so that the immensity of the power is God's
and not our own.

Gospel of St. John: 20, 24-29.

We have seen the Lord. (This phrase is used in the Gospel to mark today's Feast of St. Mary Magdalen)
Peace be with you.
Blessed are those who have not seen
and yet believe.

Fr. John Cullen
Kiltoom. Athlone
Co. Roscommon.