

Homily at the Funeral of Fr Joe O'Donnell

Wednesday, 10th July, 2019

Cathedral of Sts Eunan and Colmcille, Letterkenny

Every one of us Christians, from the day of our baptism on, is a follower of Jesus, first and foremost. The man we bury today was a follower who also had the great gift of a call to serve as a priest. When we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus it helps to use your imagination. You could imagine yourself as one of the group of men and women who followed him around Galilee and Judea when he preached and taught and healed people. You could be one of the helpers who gathered up the leftover food into 12 baskets when he fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. You might put yourself in the place of Peter, James or John at the Transfiguration or one of the three Marys at the foot of the cross. Or, you might imagine you were one of the people in the boat in the middle of a storm when they saw Jesus walking on the water and they were scared out of their wits. We often speak of the church as the Boat of Peter. We are all in the boat.

I want us to imagine Fr Joe O'Donnell as one of the characters in the boat.

He was born in St Johnstone, to Hugh and Eileen. He had a big brother Seamus and was followed later by Elaine and Jude. Joe was a delicate child, had asthma from when he was very young; the others remember his as always coughing. If that cleared up it was followed by diabetes at the age of 12 which stayed with him and somehow marked the rest of his life. Something about that delicacy led to him becoming very close to his grandparents and uncles and aunts on his mother's side. He was always up and down to them; they doted on him and he doted on them.

I want you to remember; we are growing up here to be a follower of Jesus, taking our place in Peter's boat. You are spluttering with asthma as a child and then you get a life sentence of diabetes at 12. That's pretty stormy. But then there are doting aunts and uncles. That is pretty good. A woman said to me with great feeling on Monday; "Ahh. Father Joe. Sure he was a wee dote!" Joe would have hated being described as a wee dote but delighted in the benefits of being doted upon.

For a delicate child he was sporty. He was a decent runner and a keen tennis player. Joe created a tennis court in the back yard at the house. He drew the lines and put up a net. There were titanic tennis matches between Joe and Seamus. Joe, the delicate younger brother was determined to win; he rarely did and he was a very bad loser. Little Jude and Elaine watched in horror as their older brothers nearly beat each other with tennis rackets. He wasn't just a wee dote.

After schooling in St Baithin's he went to St Eunan's College. He had been mentored by his PP, Dr Gerry Cunniagh. Dr Cunniagh had spent 30 years in Letterkenny and often said that he was delighted to escape to St Johnstone where it rained less. Niall Coll remembers sitting on the bus going into St Eunan's when it would reach Drumerdagh, where you get that first glimpse of the Cathedral, and he'd regularly hear Joe groan; 'Ahh. It's raining again

in Letterkenny!' What an irony that he would spend so many years in Letterkenny and come to love both the people and the place.

Who knows for sure what one experience more than another inspires a young man to apply to become a priest. The family think that Dr Cunniagh had an influence on Joe. He also had a vivid memory of the homecoming and First Mass of Fr Oliver McCrossan. The children of the house played at having mass. Somebody played the priest, others the servers. Joe, interestingly, was always the organist.

Anyway, he applied to join the diocese as a seminarian, was accepted and was told that he would start his formation in St Kieran's College in Kilkenny at the end of the summer. There is a vivid memory of the day a tall priest – was it Fr Austin Laverty? – arrived at the O'Donnell's front door in St Johnstone and said; 'Is Joe all set for Kilkenny?' This was the first that anyone in the O'Donnell household had heard of it; the surprise was not welcome, and no one was less pleased than Mrs O'Donnell who was absolutely clear that the rough and tumble of a seminary existence far from home was no place for her boy. No way was he going away to become a priest. He was going to get a good safe job near home!

Joe went to Kilkenny. Life's journey, including life in the Boat of Peter, is complicated. It can involve and encompass being delicate, being a dote, being a bad loser, being out of step with those we love, being canny and being steely. The point I am making is that when God calls you and me to be his followers he calls us warts and all. He has, of course, no other choice. Grace builds on nature; it builds on what is there.

In the seminary Joe was earnest, hard-working, committed to prayer. If God was calling him to be a priest, then Joe was going to take it seriously. Serving God and the people of God would be the focus of the rest of his life. He developed a love for liturgy and served the diocese well for many years as MC. When Joe would do any job he would do it well.

He could relax and enjoy life. Seamus Dagens has memories of great holidays with Joe enjoying Madame Tussauds and the London Planetarium, delighting like a child in Eurodisney. He loved listening to Kiri Tekanawa, the American singer Tom Petty and rock band Queen. He followed Leeds United through thick and thin. He would have needed the consolation of good music to help deal with the turmoil of being a Leeds Supporter ever since the glory days of Don Revie. They ended in 1974.

He was first and last a priest, a pastor. The stories of his kindness and wise counsel are endless. I don't need to rehearse them; they are in the hearts of so many people in the Cathedral today. He grew to have the heart of a good shepherd. People in trouble, people at moments of pain and loss, knew it. The children here this morning from Ballintra knew it. Joe **'got'** children and they **'got'** him. There is a girl here from Ballintra and she and her friends left her birthday party to serve on the altar at evening mass because they wouldn't see Fr Joe stuck.

You remember I joked about Joe being doted upon and learning to dote on others. The way grace works for followers of Jesus is that grace takes our particular life experience and its gifts, and allies them to the life and work of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Back to the boat. The sea is often rough in our lives. The temptation to lose hope is pretty constant. As we seek to follow Jesus, we often find ourselves like Peter being asked to walk on water. Whatever we are walking on doesn't seem to be holding us up and there is the fear that we are going down.

What more powerful image could there be for facing a terminal cancer diagnosis at the age of 54/55. In recent months that is what Joe has faced. Remember this is the man who hated losing. He has lived through it, supported by his family who have been stupendous in their loving support. For Joe and for them and for all of us too it was an experience of stepping out of the boat as followers of Jesus and walking towards him because that is who we are; that is who Joe is.

Last week Joe, as many times before, was in a lot of pain. It was very hard, for him and for Elaine and Jude, Seamus, Jackie and Niamh who were all there. I said to him, speaking on behalf of the Church; 'Joe, your living through this terrible hard moment as best you can with faith is surely the best contribution to the life of the diocese and the faith of the people that any of us is making at this moment.' He said; 'thank you for saying that.' That was Joe's act of faith.

Like Joe O'Donnell we are followers of Jesus in the boat of Peter. In ways little and great we are often out on the water. We often fear that we are going down.

Remember how the Gospel story ends:

Peter took fright and began to sink; 'Lord! Save me!' He cried. Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. 'Man of little faith,' he said. 'Why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said; 'Truly you are the Son of God.'