

“Do not let your hearts be troubled”

We come together at this time to honour and mourn (our relative and friend X). Whether expected or unexpected, the death of someone we know and love still produces in us great turmoil. Our love, our sadness, our sense of loss, our compassion, our powerlessness, our sense of awe at death, and our fear can all be mingled together.

As Jesus was approaching his hour of death, he knew that his disciples were troubled with these same emotions. He comforted them and reassured them. His words of comfort have spoken through the centuries and still speak to us today.

God knows and loves each one of us. God calls us his children. He sees us and knows us individually. He knows our gifts, our personalities, our joys and sufferings, our needs, and our worries. He has known us from the very beginning and his love for us has no bounds. Jesus words, “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places” is a way of saying that we have a place in his life and love forever.

Jesus was facing the reality of his own death as he spoke these words. We know that in the garden of Gethsemane he faced with agony the pain and suffering which he was about to endure. We know that this caused him anguish and turmoil, but we also know that despite the fear of the manner of his death, he faced his death with quiet confidence. “I am going to prepare a place for you. I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also”. He knew that death was not the end, that God is the God of life, the God of resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection is the sure and honest promise of our own resurrection and it is in him that we put our trust as we suffer the loss of our loved ones and face the prospect of our own dying.

Yet the disciple Thomas asked the same question that we may well be asking, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” At a time of loss, these feelings of bewilderment, of inability to cope, and of doubt, can beset any of us. ‘Be assured’, says Jesus. ‘Don’t be troubled.’ Jesus not only knows the way, he is the way. Believe in Jesus and trust him. He is the truth which will set you free from doubt. He is the life which enables us to go on in our daily pursuits, and the life which gives those who have died, life eternal.

In his poem ‘You Can’t Go Home Again’, the American novelist, playwright and poet, Thomas Wolfe speaks of death this way:

To lose the earth you know
for greater knowing;
To lose the life you have
for greater life;
To leave the friends you loved,
for greater loving;
To find a land more kind than home,
more large than earth –

By ourselves, we cannot know God. Only in the life of Jesus, in following his way, in understanding his truth, can we enter into his life, experience his resurrection and ascension, and be with the Father forever. This is Jesus’ promise. Hold on to it as you mourn. Hold on to it as you live and as you face your own dying and death.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. May Jesus’ words give you comfort as you remember the love and life of X and be assured that he/she will remain in God’s life and love always.

“The Lord is my shepherd”

What images come into your mind when we say, “The Lord is my Shepherd”? Perhaps it’s an idyllic country scene of white sheep grazing comfortably in a safe pasture, perhaps a biblical shepherd guarding his small flock, perhaps the shepherd carrying a lamb around his shoulders or in the crook of his arm. Whatever picture is in your mind’s eye it will be a scene of tenderness, protection and comfort.

Psalm 23 has spoken through the ages of God’s love and care for each one of us throughout our lives. It speaks of God’s relationship with (our relative and friend X) and reassures us about God’s love for him/her even in death. It speaks of God’s relationship with each of us as we face our own living and dying. It is no wonder then that Jesus adopted this same metaphor and identified himself as the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

Each of us is very special to God. Like the shepherd of biblical times, he knows our names; he understands our personalities; he is sensitive to our needs; he shares our joys, and our griefs and sorrows. We are God’s and God loves us. God loved (our relative and friend X). He was with him/her through all his/her life... In this relationship of love and trust, (X) moved through life knowing God’s provision - loving, guiding, protecting, rescuing him/her and keeping him/her on the right track. We give thanks for (X)’s life and give thanks that he/she knew the tenderness, protection and comfort of the good shepherd.

There are times in life when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We may experience this shadow in times of stress in our personal lives and in our work; times of despair when we can see no way forward. This week may be one of those times, when the sadness of the death of (X) has cast a pall over your own lives. The loss and sadness that we feel at this time is certainly real. God knows how we feel, God knows the problems we face, the fears we have, the deadening feelings we experience. He knows and cares. But God will guide and protect us. God will rescue us from the things we fear. God will heal our wounds of sadness and sorrow and loneliness and guilt of things not done or words not said, especially of those things we regret in our relationship with (X). He is there to assure us of his forgiveness, his compassion, and his love forever. We fear no evil when the tender Holy Spirit envelopes us with protection and comfort, if we but surrender to God’s loving embrace.

“I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” What a wonderful hope! Jesus reassured his disciples before his own death that his father’s house has many rooms. God has room for all in his life and love. And his life and love are everlasting. It is in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and in knowing Jesus in his risen life, that we understand and believe these words. We know that (X) is now part of God’s life and love forever. May we also experience God’s comfort and promise of love for us through our voyage of life, and through death into life everlasting.

A Sermon to be given at the Baptism of a Child

Baptism is a gift

There is nothing more thrilling than the birth of a child. We know that this new life is a miracle and it is easy to talk of the “gift of life”, or the “gift of a child”. In the exuberance and wonder of new birth we very much know that God is the giver of life, and with life those attributes of warmth, love, joy and hope. The child is a complete human being as he/she is, yet we also know that this little body has huge potential. Who will he/she be? What will he/she become? What hope we have!

God loves each one of us and today we come to witness his special love for (child X) as he/she receives the precious gift of baptism. This gift itself is life-giving and life-sustaining; it is easy to carry; it's a source of light for the voyage of life. Let us just unwrap this gift to see what it mean to be baptized with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

First of all, (child X) marked as Christ's forever. The sign of the cross of Christ cannot be eradicated. (Child X) is a member of Christ. Now this membership is more than just joining a club. His/her membership is far more organic than that. He/she is now as integral to the body of Christ just as any organ of your body is an integral part of your body. Christ lives in (Child X) and (Child X) lives in Christ. This is a wonderful relationship. (Child X) begins today his/her life as a member of Christ, an integral part of the Body and he/she has before him/her the wonderful prospect of growing into her baptism as he/she grows more Christ-like, ever responding to the call of Jesus to follow him.

Now this gift of membership means that (Child X) is like Jesus in his/her relationship with the Father. In baptism he/she became a child of our heavenly Father, just like Jesus. This relationship is one close to God, (Child X) can call him Father, can speak and listen to him in prayer, can know that God holds him/her in his heart, loved for who he/she is and forgiven when things go wrong. It is being given blessing after blessing. And there's more to this gift. It holds not only a present reality but a future promise. (Child X) is now an inheritor of the kingdom of God. There is the promise of eternal life, sharing his joy and peace and mercy and love for ever.

And with this gift come some instructions about care and responsibility in looking after the precious gift.

(Child X) is asked to recognise that this gift has given him/her a particular character. He/she is to live as a disciple of Christ. This is what it means to grow into your Baptism. It is to choose to be like Christ, to love God and to love other people as we love ourselves. It is to choose to love and serve others by putting others before ourselves. With the gift of baptism come lots of other gifts, part and parcel of the package – gifts which are there to be developed for use in ministry. Already Child X is showing some of these talents – that lovely smile, that ability to respond, that ability to bring out love in others.

Child (X) is asked not to be ashamed that he/she is a Christian. She/he is to say proudly to others that he/she has been baptized and is a member of the Church and we hope that later on she will claim this faith as her own in the celebration of Confirmation. But it will not be just in words that he/she confesses Christ. Her/his life will be so imbued with Christ's love that the light of Christ will shine from his/her face, and he/she will bring light to others, helping to bring Christ's light wherever there is darkness and evil, sadness and fear.

This gift of baptism comes with great privileges and great responsibilities. May (Child X) know he/she is special to God; may he/she grow in Christ-likeness; and may he/she live life to the full, knowing that God is gracious in his abundance.