

HOMILY AT THE FUNERAL MASS FOR DEACON NOEL WILLIAMS

ST. MARY'S CHURCH NEWPORT

ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

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When I was young, I was taught that you should learn to pray with the bible in one hand and the newspaper, or perhaps today the internet, in the other. One purpose of prayer being to bring together the different worlds we each inhabit, even within one life. To integrate the outer world of our public face with the inner landscape of our lives by allowing God's revelation to shine into my deepest thoughts and emotions, my hopes and fears, my joys and my sadness. In my prayer, I seek to make my story part of His story so that the history of salvation can be written in my life too.

The Bible passages for Noel's funeral do precisely that. The Book of Ecclesiastes, unfolding wisdom from over three thousand years ago. Yes there is a time for everything, but time goes so fast, and we are all so busy that there isn't enough time to do everything, to be everything that we ought to be. Noel knew a great deal about the grace of the present moment. Valuing the love he shared with Mary his wife, their children Frances and Victoria, and their grandchildren Mair, Freya and Orla. His family was a still point in this turning world. I first met him when he was about to retire from what was obviously a successful and fulfilling career at the Colour Centre. He wasn't concerned about having time for himself. He knew that the time Ecclesiastes speaks of isn't just chronological time, the ticking clock, or the passing years. It is Kairos time, the time of opportunity, the time of deepening, the time of understanding, the time of fulfilment.

Isn't that how Noel "made time" to become a Deacon, to accept this very public ministry in the life of the Church, to use his undoubted gifts of faith, of care and understanding? He put those gifts at the service of innumerable people in his preaching and teaching, in his journeying with others through the RCIA, in his companionship whilst visiting the sick and housebound bringing them Holy Communion. It's no accident that the word "companion" comes from "cum pane" with bread, sharing the sacrament of the Bread of Life who is Jesus with those who were in need of that nourishment.

In one way, no time is right for sickness, or suffering, or the death of a child. Where is God in human suffering, we ask. It is only when you have experienced suffering that you dare say with Jesus "Here" with his arms outstretched on the cross. Mary and Noel knew that at first hand. They learned through suffering and bereavement that no time is wasted in which God is served. The service of God is the sanctification of time. It is when our faith is tested in these painful times that we come closest to the suffering Jesus Himself endured for our salvation.

How to bring all that to life in our own life is the message of today's Gospel. The beatitudes taught by Jesus are the core of his message. Our translation said "Happy" are the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who hunger and thirst for what is right. I prefer the word "Blessed" are the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart. All of you who knew and lived and worked with Noel know that he personified those qualities in his gentle, enthusiastic and humble way. He saw good in other people – even his Archbishop! Fr. Michael Evans has written from Kerry assuring Noel's family that he is with us in prayer as he celebrates Mass for Noel this morning with the Sisters of St. Joseph. His reflection on Noel was that he was always calm and reasonable, always a peacemaker – sometimes infuriatingly so! He was always a facilitator, wanting the best for people and being available to ensure those good things could happen.

On the day of his ordination to the Diaconate, Noel lay prostrate before this altar in a gesture of humility and abandonment. "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will". Today he lies before the altar again in that final act of abandonment which is death "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit". Praying over Noel on that day the Bishop said:

May he excel in every virtue:

In love that is sincere,

In concern for the sick and the poor,

In unassuming authority,

In self discipline

And in holiness of life.

The presence of so many here today give inspiring witness to how he fulfilled that prayer abundantly.