

FUNERAL MASS FOR FR. JOHN MEREDITH  
OUR LADY AND ST. PATRICK MAESTEG  
6 JANUARY 2014 - ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

One of the most moving parts of the Ordination ceremony for a priest is when he has to lie prostrate before the altar. The candidate is reminded that this is a gesture of humility while the people sing the Litany of the Saints: "Lord I am not worthy". He is reminded that this is a gesture of abandonment to the will of God: "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will". It is a gesture of trust: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening".

We reflected on those things here at Maesteg at the wonderful Silver Jubilee celebration of Fr. John's ordination on 21 June just gone. The obituary which has been published and circulated throughout the Diocese spells out how he fulfilled those promises in his dedicated service to this and the other parishes over the last twenty five years. He also so much other work in the Diocese and beyond because of his expertise in liturgical studies.

Today, John lies before the altar in the final act of abandonment which is the moment of death. This definitive reality seems to contradict everything we strive for as we seek to "hang on" to life. It is made more difficult to us when his death was premature, humanly speaking, and so swift after the diagnosis of cancer. So we come together this evening to "re-member" to put back together our different memories of his life and ministry, our reasons to be grateful to God for John's life of faithful service. Each of us knows how difficult it is to put into words what we think and what we want to say. Difficult even to find the right words to pray.

That is why the Church during the Funeral Mass gives us the words of scripture to make our own. It gives us the words of the prayers so that our grieving and hoping may be lifted up into an act of thanksgiving. The word-less action of the Mass which makes the offering of the life and death of Jesus Himself to God takes up our lives and John's too as an acceptable offering to God. John would have preached often at funerals using the words of the Book of Wisdom which we heard tonight. "If, as it seemed to us, they suffered punishment, their hope was rich with immortality; slight was their affliction. Great will their blessings be". Like all of us, he will have had to make sense of those words in his own life, not least during the fast deterioration in his health over the last few weeks. His death, like all suffering, challenges us with the words of St. Paul to the Romans: "I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nothing in existence and nothing still to come... will be able to come between us and the love of God, made visible to us in Jesus Christ". John has now experienced God face to face. He will see in the face of Jesus his brother, his Saviour and his friend.

Brian Patten puts all this well in his poem "So many Different Lengths of Time". He paints the outline of a life. He invites us to color in the picture of John's life and death from our own perspective, our own experience of his ministry, our own faith..

How long is a man's life, finally?  
Is it a thousand days, or only one?  
One week, or a few centuries?  
How long does a man's death last?  
And what do we mean when we say "gone forever" ?

Adrift in such preoccupations, we seek clarification.  
We can go to the philosophers  
But they will weary of our questions.  
We can go to the priests and the rabbis  
But they might be too busy with administrations.

So how long does a man live after all?  
And how much does he live while he lives?  
We fret and ask so many questions-  
Then when it comes to us  
The answer is so simple, after all.

A man lives for as long as we carry him inside us  
For as long as we carry the harvest of his dreams  
For as long as we ourselves live,  
Holding memories in common, a man lives.

The days will pass with baffled faces  
Then the weeks, then the months.  
There will be a day when no question is asked  
And the knots of grief will loosen in the stomach  
And the puffed faces will calm.  
But on that day he will not have ceased  
But will have ceased to be separated by death.

How long does a man live after all?  
A man lives so many different lengths of time.

We Christians believe that a man lives forever in the living and loving memory of God.