

Funeral homily - Michael McGovern SDB 28th August 2003

Just a few weeks ago Michael came here to Thornleigh for the last time. He was by this stage a dying man, plagued by frequent bouts of vomiting as the cancer continued to spread throughout his system. He came to our elderly house in St Joseph's to take part in the last retreat of his life with his brother Salesians. I was privileged to preach that retreat together with a Salesian Sister from the United States, Sr Mary Rinaldi. For the first three days Michael was so sick that I offered to take him back up to Durham, but in typical fashion he was determined to stay. At the end of the week, he said, 'my body is breaking up but this retreat has done my soul and my spirit a power of good.' As his Salesian community all of us were deeply impressed with his presence; he was brave, uncomplaining and serene. Sr. Mary Rinaldi has since e-mailed me from the US. 'Fr Michael made a deep impression on my soul during that week. In fact he preached that retreat to me. He is a giant in faith.'

Those who study masculine spirituality speak of different archetypes, different ways in which a man's spirit is expressed and lived. Ideally the mature man shares many of them but usually one will predominate. Michael was a warrior in the true and vibrant sense of the term. He was brave, enthusiastic, passionate and fiercely loyal, a proud son of Scotland. In fact as we were carrying his coffin out of St Joseph's church yesterday afternoon to the swirl of bagpipes playing 'Flower of Scotland' I was just glad that my name wasn't Edward! He loved to put on his leather gear and shoot off at great speed on his Norton motor bike (story of police).

He was indeed a warrior and that is why I chose the figure of Jacob in our first reading. For Jacob too was a warrior, a man of passion. He wrestled with God and in this very mysterious

and profound story God wounded him. What was Jacob fighting for? The story tells us that he wanted to know the name of God. To know and discover the name of God is at the heart of our human story. God has created us for no other purpose than to share a profound relationship of love. This is a gift which goes beyond our worthiness. It is a music that is played in the deepest core of our being, a melody that only God and the those who love him know.

So much of Michael's life can be summed up as a symphony. Our lives are unfinished symphonies. So too is Michael's because in dying he has passed beyond the limitations of our earthly hearing of God's melodies to the clarity and the perfection of direct experience of the vision of God, to hear the music of eternity.

We have just heard in the gospel of Mark about that foundational moment at the beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth. As he emerged from the waters of the Jordan after baptism by John he heard the voice of the Father: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you.' Those words carry meaning and significance for all of us. They assure us of our true identity in God, beloved son, beloved daughter. This has nothing to do with worthiness; it is a pure gift of unconditional love which God lavishes on us. But then Mark tells us that Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted. I think that what we learn from this is that it is not sufficient to hear that we are beloved son /beloved daughter of God but that reality has to be experienced in all aspects of life and especially the trials and tribulations. God wants all parts of us: the good, the bad and yes, even the ugly! In our second reading Paul reminds the Romans of this foundational identity. No matter what happens to us in life, with God on our side, asks Paul, who can be against us? 'For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come,

not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.' This is the good news of the gospel. It doesn't mean that life will be easy, or free from pain or suffering but it give us somewhere to take the pain, to connect it with a wider horizon of meaning, to save us from the isolated self that looks scapegoats or for someone to blame. It teaches us that the universe, though flawed, is essentially benevolent; that God is with us in all our human experience, and amazingly even in our sin in the form of forgiveness.

Michael was born into this benevolent universe on 28th September 1920 in Glasgow. From the security and love of a good catholic home and family he entered the Salesian novitiate at Beckford in 1938. Professed a year later he studied philosophy in Shrigley before beginning his practical training as a teacher in Chertsey from 1942-1945. He began his theological studies again at Shrigley before moving to Blaisdon where he was ordained a Salesian priest in 1949.

His years of active priestly ministry fall into two main phases. From 1949-1983 he taught music here in Thornleigh College. And maybe not all of you know that he was a reluctant music teacher. He didn't think he would be good enough! He certainly didn't have any problems keeping discipline. (Angus story)

Upon his 'retirement' as a teacher he studied in both California and Ushaw College before beginning his final phase of parish priestly ministry from 1985 until his death last week, a total of 18 years during which he gave very dedicated service to the people of St Joseph's Durham. Yesterday and on Tuesday evening we saw and heard how much he was respected and truly loved by the parishioners. In Fr Michael Corbett he met a genuine priestly brother and companion, who gave him such remarkable love and care during these last long months of

illness. Michael's sister, Mona, and her husband, Pat, also shared this burden with great love and attention in the recent difficult weeks.

I just want to say a brief word about his period of 34 years teaching music here in Thornleigh. Michael's love and passion for music created something really special here during that time. In his homily yesterday Fr Michael Winstanley recalled the remark of our Salesian Rector Major who said that the Thornleigh Brass Band was the best boys band he had heard anywhere in the world. I know that is true because I he said it to me on another occasion, as he was telling me this in his office in Rome he pointed to a green and white Celtic scarf, hanging in the corner of his office I leave you to draw your own conclusions! Many of you here will recall those wonderful concerts in the Victoria Hall, the May processions, and so many performances here in Thornleigh and all over the north west.

On the occasion of Michael's priestly golden jubilee in this chapel in 1999 I made reference to the 'miracle' that Michael McGovern worked here. His school choir was made up of boys who all shared the distinctive - and quite wonderful (forgive the bias!) Lancashire accent. But when those boys sang under the direction of Fr Michael McGovern those broad Lancashire accents were transformed into Scottish ones! 'Lord have meerrcy, Lord have meerrcy'....they would sing, as they became Lancastrian Glaswegians. The power of an inspirational and passionate teacher! Fr Michael was an enthusiastic and loving man. He made friends easily and kept them. His loyalty to Celtic Football Club was legendary and he was always ready to offer a sympathetic word to me about the fortunes or misfortunes of Bolton Wanderers!

I mentioned earlier that he was a warrior....and you don't argue with a warrior! He could be very impatient, stubborn and

determined to get his way and woe betide anyone who blocked him, but it was all part of his determination to get the best out of his pupils. In my last conversation with him when I said that David, who has organised all this wonderful music for the funeral mass today, was hoping to get some of his band members to play. He looked up, smiled and said, 'They had better be good!' During Michael's final battle with cancer I know how many past pupils wrote to him to tell him much his teaching had impacted on them and enriched their lives.

Jacob wanted to know the name of God; but none of us can know the name of God and live. So he asked for a blessing which was granted to him. To bless others is one of the greatest gifts and responsibilities of an educator and a priest. To bless the young, to confer on them approval, encouragement, acceptance. This is the key to St John Bosco's educational system. And in his priestly ministry in the north east Michael continued to bless so many people through the sacraments, his wonderful sermons, full of great stories, his care of the sick and simply his cheerful presence among you on so many social occasions.

Our search for God is always a response to his search for us, and as life unfolds we experience this search in different ways. The search in youth and the search in middle and later adulthood are well chronicled in wisdom tales and myths around the world. In our youthful years we take the initiative, we seek new challenges and are more interested in overcoming than accepting. We are more interested in seeking than finding. In later years we discover that alongside passion and enthusiasm we need wisdom and patience. Our earlier seeking of God in far off challenges leads us home where we find God in the unexpected and familiar face of the human, in what is limited, and imperfect, in the weak and the poor, and especially in the

mystery of suffering. As Jacob said: 'now I know that God is truly here.'

In wrestling with God, Jacob was wounded. In the final phase of his life Michael too was wounded with a painful and debilitating illness. He struggled so bravely with this and was determined to serve the Lord in active ministry as long as was humanly possible. And this he did right up to the end. But he was now being led in the way Jesus was through and into a real crucifixion. Strangely as he grew weaker the power of God seemed to shine through him more than ever before. As his body grew weaker his soul grew greater. Why does God seem to wound so many of those he loves? I think it may be because when we truly love we become vulnerable. The warrior who wants to wrestle with God and with life then learns to care for others who are vulnerable. Our Risen Lord went back to his beloved Father carrying the wounds of human love.

On the last day of his final retreat last month we were having a celebration meal and a singing a few songs as we often do in our elderly house here in St Joseph's. Throughout the week Michael's once powerful voice had been growing weaker. But as we sang the Battle Hymn of the Republic he suddenly recovered all his strength and thundered out the words, 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord' It was as if the warrior recognised his old song. Our prayer today is that Michael is now receiving the reward of a true and faithful warrior in the service of the Lord, one who is now listening to the music of eternity, the music that echoes the name of God.

May his great soul rest in peace.

