

Diocesan Mass for Pope John Paul II, RIP

Sermon by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

Friday, 15 April 2005, in St George's Cathedral, Southwark

The readings we have heard this evening are readings that we will have heard many times at funeral Masses or Requiem Masses. But the scripture is a living word and it takes on new and fresh meaning every time it is proclaimed. That is certainly the case today as we gather together for this Requiem Mass during the nine days of official mourning for the Holy Father. "The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God." Tonight we mourn a man of outstanding goodness and integrity whose holiness was and is self-evident. "Slight their affliction, great will their blessings be." The Pope's afflictions were scarcely slight but he is now blest and he was very much a blessing to us all precisely in and through his afflictions. Gerry O'Connell, one of the journalists based in Rome said in an interview: "He taught us how to die." I think he did. Sometimes we want to forget people's final illnesses and remember them in their days of health and vigour, but the closing days and weeks of the Pope's life were an integral part of his pastoral ministry. During his last illness he bore personal witness to central themes of his teaching: the wisdom of the cross, and the absolute value of life.

These reflections are very appropriate for our Mass for Pope John Paul since we are celebrating it in the cathedral that the Pope visited in 1982 and where he administered the Sacrament of the Sick. As we remember the Pope, it is fitting to remember the teaching that he gave here, not least because it illuminates both his life and the manner of his death.

Here are two quotations from the Pope's homily given here on 28th May 1982.

He said:

"It is precisely because I have experienced suffering that I am able to affirm with ever greater conviction what St Paul says . . . 'Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

"Dear friends, there is no force or power that can block God's love for you. Sickness and suffering

seem to contradict all that is worthy, all that is desired by man. And yet, no disease, no injury, no infirmity can ever deprive you of your dignity as children of God, as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ."

And later on in that homily, he said:

"I support with all my heart those who recognise and defend the law of God which governs human life. We must never forget that every person, from the moment of conception to the last breath, is a unique child of God and has a right to life. This right should be defended by the attentive care of the medical and nursing professions and by the protection of the law. Every human life is willed by our heavenly Father and is part of his loving plan."

It is significant, I suggest, that the Pope spoke of his own sufferings. One very marked feature of his character was his very strong sense of vocation: of being called to a particular vocation which he must fulfil whatever the obstacles. Recently a cousin of mine was talking to me about the close connection between two lines of the New Testament which seem to me to encapsulate the spirit and manner of Pope John Paul's response to his vocation. They are the words of Our Lady to the Angel Gabriel: "Let it be done unto me according to your word", and the words of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, not my will but thine be done." And the Pope's motto, "*Totus tuus*" also suggests this total gift of himself to God's will and God's purposes, no matter what the cost and this I am sure shaped his personal spirituality. He gave himself completely: self-sacrifice and self-transcendence were there for all to see and made possible the unique, energetic and tireless ministry that he maintained for twenty-six years, including his last days.

And his response to his vocation bore immense fruit. During the last twenty-six years, he reached far more people than would have been possible for any of his predecessors. What I found remarkable about the media coverage of the Pope's sickness and death was the extent and the positive nature of it. It was clear that both his life and his passing were seen by many outside the Church as of huge significance. Everyone

recognised him as the greatest spiritual leader of modern times and a tremendous force for good in the world. He was a very visible Pope and his loss is felt both in the Church and beyond as a personal loss. The loss of someone who gave himself totally to others. His life and witness is an icon, an illustration of what it means to respond to a vocation. I hope and pray that the memory of Pope John Paul II will help us all to understand what it means to be called and what it means to respond to the Lord's call.

So much has been said and written about the Pope and this is not the occasion for going over all the events of his life. We are here as a diocese to mourn and to pray for him. But I would like to suggest for our reflection two intimately connected aspects of his life and teaching which we find expressed in the short address he made before leaving Britain in 1982. He said:

"I came here as a herald of peace, to proclaim the Gospel of peace and a message of reconciliation and love. I came also as a servant, the servant of Jesus Christ, my Saviour, and the servant, too, of all Christian people."

Reconciliation with God and reconciliation among people.

Pope John Paul confirmed the Catholic world in its faith: he proclaimed the reconciliation of God and humanity brought about by the death of Christ. But it was precisely this conviction about the reconciliation brought about by Christ that motivated him to seek to heal division, conflict and injustice; to reach out in love and in a spirit of dialogue to other Churches, other religions and all humanity. In him the poor of the earth, the victims of systemic injustice, had an advocate and we owe it to his memory to ensure that that voice continues to be heard. I know from my own experience of working with him, his deep concern for Christian unity. He had a very intense sense of personal responsibility for the fulfilment of Christ's prayer that "They all may be one." He once referred to his own primacy as a primacy in the search for Christian unity. He was always clear about the obstacles to Christian unity but never succumbed to the slightest degree of discouragement or cynicism. A virtuous soul. He boldly brought together members of different religions: not to pray together but to come together to pray for peace. He understood the importance of interreligious

dialogue for world peace and he understood it long before the events of 9/11.

He pleaded passionately for freedom and for justice and the tributes that have been paid to him have recognised the crucial role he played in the fall of Communism. But the freedom he advocated was not the freedom intended in contemporary rhetoric about "choice": it was the freedom that is the fruit of reconciliation with God - freedom to live in love of God and authentic love of others. Love that is not self-seeking or self-regarding but which dies to self in giving to God and to others. This was the message of his life and of the manner of his death. Today in this place where Pope John Paul preached and ministered the love of God, let us give thanks and praise to God for his life and witness. He has affected the lives of all of us. May the seed that he has sown continue to bear fruit in the diocese, in the Church, and in the world. May he rest in peace.