

Memorial Eucharist for Canon Norman Kelly on Friday 5th April 2013.

Address by the Very Revd John Mann, Dean of Belfast and former Rector of St John's Malone

Wisdom 3:1-9; Acts 4: 1-12; John 21: 1-14

The moment I heard of Norman's death I had that extraordinary sensation of feeling instantly bereft of a friend. I don't suppose I have seen Norman more than half a dozen times in the past eighteen months, but loss is a funny thing, tied up, as it is, as much to the past as it is to the present. But also that is true of the disciples' experience on the sea and shore of Galilee as recorded in the Gospel for this service. The fishermen had gone back to their roots, gone back to what they knew and what comfortable with, but they were once more surprised into a new challenging situation; the familiar present, linked to an uncanny re-run of the past, brought a fresh encounter; that acknowledged the past, its faults and its questions, as much as its success, and established, crucially, that though things may be different, relationships are being maintained, in fact deepened by the pain of change that is leading them all to reconsider of what their lives consist.

Having one's eyes opened to the risen Christ afresh – and it was afresh for these fishermen, for they had already witnessed Jesus, risen and alive on Easter day in Jerusalem – made them really consider what they were about. There was, of course, the inspiration and excitement of seeing Jesus again, but there is something more happening here, and that is connected to the homely familiarity of the context in which our Lord is being revealed afresh. Think about it. There is the Sea of Galilee; home, security, familiarity – away from the dangers, the threats and foreign feel of Jerusalem; then too there is the old occupation; "I am going fishing", "We will go with you". But lastly, and just as importantly as these things, there is the meal – and what a meal – this is something special; breakfast on the beach; fresh fish, broken bread, a charcoal fire, an occasion with friends. Here in the midst is the sense of holiness that is untouchable, un-creatable, these things must be allowed to happen, we cannot force them; decide that today we are going to have such and such an experience of God! All we do is to try to love with all our heart, to try to tend the lambs, feed the sheep, live lives that seek to be compassionate; recline next to Jesus, seek with all out hearts to follow. Do the basic things of discipleship – and leave the rest to him; the one standing on the beach, on the edge, calling to us, though sometimes it is that we cannot recognise the sight or the voice; but if we do the right thing, the possibilities open before us. The way may still not be clear, but the words of life are being heard and we have the chance to respond. We don't always do it, but then neither did Peter, or John, or James.

I suppose it is, that as I think of Norman, I think of someone who travelled the way of Christian discipleship, walked the way of the Christian priest as well as anyone I know. There are of course many others, but Norman is in good company with those whose faithfulness to his calling is as near to the exemplary priest as our frail lives can accommodate. He would not wish me to speak so, and perhaps I shouldn't, but I cannot help it really, for it is a quality of Christian ministry that the Church has much less now than in the past and is arguably, more in need of it than ever. Simple godliness is not an easily definable quality, so let us leave that, and be cautious and not over-praiseworthy, just say that Norman did not live his life in compartments – a Church bit and a personal bit – Norman was a priest through and through – a good example of what I believe should still be the norm: a man or woman ordained at or near the minimum age and whose whole adult life is spent in learning what it means to be a priest. Norman knew what he was about; perhaps it was his upbringing in the shadow of Christ Church Cathedral Dublin; perhaps being a cathedral chorister helped, maybe even the experience of the Divinity School and Trinity College or his first curacy at Waringstown; but if ever a place left its mark on the man, then this Parish of Malone was it; curate-assistant here for nine happy years in which he married a woman of the Parish, his beloved Noreen, and then more than 26 years of retirement again as accustomed parishioners – travelling from the Rosetta part of Down Diocese to the "Plain of the Lambs", that most lovely of translation of the Irish of the word "Malone". This Parish, by its very name is, in a way, dedicated to the Good Shepherd and his flock and today we remember an under shepherd, that was, just like Peter called to lead others to good pasture.

Norman's two curacies were important to him and he built upon his careful training as a chorister to become what Canon Brian Mayne described in a 90th Birthday tribute to him as "a perfectionist". 'Meticulous' and "thorough" are the words I would choose to describe Norman's approach to all things in life, and especially to matters pertaining to worship from personal preparation to guidance for others; from the said to the sung; from the reading of the Word to the administration of the Sacrament. When I arrived in this Parish

nearly 11 years ago Norman had everything well ordered, from a list for the visitation of the sick, to the orders of service ready for the seasons, incorporating the new elements of liturgy about to be appearing in the Book of Common Prayer 2004; all of these issued under the previous Rector, the then Archdeacon of Connor, Alan Harper were filed for me by Norman with music from Dr Davison as well as advice on the St John's Chapter: Bishop Poyntz, Canons Turner, Mayne, Lendrum (with occasional visits from Bishop Darling and from the Bishop of the Diocese – who knew the Parish well) and of course, with modesty, he himself! It was a powerful clerical combination for one Parish, but in a real and active way, Norman was its heart. He, who had moved from St John's to Billy before I was born, became a new and valued friend and a faithful colleague whom, I sensed from the first moment, I could trust with anything and did trust with quite a lot! Norman's home became a place of Noreen's afternoon teas – then she would leave us for a natter which went from anything from the Church Times (which he read assiduously) to matters of Parish concern that he tended lovingly. He always gave me my place as Rector.

But this is passing over the years at Billy, that first Parish, which is so crucial to all priests and their families. It was in the beautiful north Antrim area that Norman was first in the position of making decisions and living with them, being first on call for the pastoral demands of the Parish, whilst Noreen found a new teaching job and together they formed the wonderful and caring Rectory team that was to be such a gift to each successive parish in which they lived and served. The call to Dorking in Guildford Diocese was one of those chance moves on which our lives change; or was it chance? Anyhow, as Brian Mayne put it, "The adventure was on". Norman was on the staff of the Parish with special responsibility for Ranmore. After three years, the Kelly's moved to the Parish of New Haw, where Norman became Priest in Charge and subsequently Vicar. It was here that Norman and Noreen made, through their own act of kindness, one of the most important friendships of their lives as they gave temporary home in 1972 to a parish family, to Jane and Margot, and their mother. Jane George and Margot Wells remain close, Norman officiating at both their weddings and maybe I may quote some words that they wrote of Norman in the 90th Birthday tribute; from Jane: Norman's "services were so deep, so quiet and thoughtful – I really felt part of something great" – carefully chosen words, I think, or from Margot: "Norman has always moved forward in his views keeping abreast with changing lifestyles and being willing to revise and renew his opinions". One is not surprised to find that Norman was also Rural Dean for some years, but in 1978 he and Noreen made another move, that to Egham Hythe, where they were very happy; two years later the Bishop appointed Norman as a Canon of Guildford Cathedral. From here they returned to Belfast for a long and fruitful period of retirement. Close to Noreen's family and many old friends from Saint John's and elsewhere, plus making new friends, not least the Rector, Alan Harper, working for USPG and remaining very active. This last and longest period of their married life ended just before Holy Week, and though the last two years have not been the easiest with declining health, I know that Norman would be the first to give thanks for the nearly sixty years of married life, with which they were blessed. Our prayers are with Noreen and her extended family and with all who hold them dear and grieve Norman's death.

Easter week is so special for clergy families as the heavy work-load of Holy Week passes into some days of rest; but more importantly, for all Christians, it is a week when the miracle of our Lord's resurrection is recounted over and over; those most special moments that are ever new; Thomas in the Upper Room declaring "My Lord and my God" through the aching memory of his doubts; the burning hearts of the disciples on the Emmaus road, by no means cooled by their rapid return to Jerusalem; the women in the Garden; Peter and John in stunned amazement at the tomb, and then with this amazing sense of "we have heard it all before" the disciples, together, meet Jesus at the Sea of Galilee; the water, the fish, the bread, the fire, the early morning and the guidance from Jesus not only to find the fish, but how to turn their experience of his resurrection into renewed lives of joy and love; these things underpinning the fact that life is stronger than death; love, than all the things that seek to destroy it, and a knowledge of Christ as the Light of the World and light of each of our lives, the thing that sustains us all in the dark moments of sin and illness, of loneliness and loss, of sadness and the temptation to doubt and fear.

Norman's steady unassuming faith is something I often think of as I buckle on my shoulders his Cope that he gave me when I became Dean; which he wore in Guildford Cathedral. I wear it as a token of our friendship and of the respect in which I shall always hold this man, who gave far more than he shall ever know to those around him; if that is the definition of a godly man, that I was struggling to find earlier, well it will serve as an epitaph to him, as we in as careful and prayerful way as he would, lay his ashes in the churchyard of this blessed place. May his memory live long in this Parish and his love in the hearts of all whose lives have been touched by him: Norman Kelly, faithful and wise servant of God.