



## Homily at Columba Ryan's Funeral

St Dominic's Priory, London, 18 August 2009

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Readings: *Job 19:1, 23–27ab; Romans 8:14–23; Mark 15:33–39; 16:1–6*

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When we were novices in Cork many years ago one of our pleasant duties was to visit Archbishop Finbar Ryan, Columba's uncle, who was retired in a hospital there, well into his nineties. In our innocence we tried to flatter him one day, quoting the psalm that says 'our span is seventy years, or eighty for those who are strong', adding that ninety must then be for supermen. Finbar growled, and barked at us, 'eighty for those who are strong and ninety for those who are weak!'

Columba, the Uncle Paddy of the next generation, often growled in that way too, showing the same quick wit and resistance to anything he thought might simply be flattery. Like Finbar's, Columba's was a huge life of 93 years, almost 73 years professed as a Dominican and he had just celebrated 68 years as a priest. His life was huge for the number of places it involved, from Glasgow to Rabat, from Constantinople to Cork, and for the number of people in his life. Not just the number of people, but the many different kinds of people involved in so many different things, religious, intellectual, artistic, political, and those who were simply his faithful friends. What is one to say when so much could be said?

The first reading from Job speaks about the power of words. Irritated by the speeches of his friends, giving what he regards as dishonest answers to his questions about suffering and the justice of God, Job says that their words torment and shatter him. But words are what Job wants, words written by someone somewhere that will capture the significant meaning of his life, words that will stand up in the presence of God and represent him there. In a moment of strange insight, he says that he must look for an Advocate beyond the boundaries of mortality, beyond the limitations of skin and flesh, deciding that the only one who can be a proper representative for him before God will be God himself.

This is the sort of perplexity that delighted Columba, not just a confused text, or a text about the power of words, but a text raising difficult questions to which the philosophical mind might apply itself. Already, in this short passage from Job, there are questions about life and death, about body and soul, about justice and truth, the kind of question to which Columba devoted his life.

Job is one of the Bible's philosophers and Columba was one of the philosophers of the English Dominican province. He not only taught philosophy as a subject but was always a lover of wisdom in the sense that he continued to search for truth and justice all his life. He loved the life of the body – travelling to interesting places, enjoying their culture and history, being with his family and friends, drinking interesting beverages (he notes a pub in Scotland that serves 80 different brands of malt whisky and laments that he spent his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in the Royal Free Hospital 'unable to enjoy my gin that day'). But he also loved the life of the spirit, intellect and knowledge, discussion and argument, blessed with a clarity of thought second to none and with the great gift of being able to speak of complicated and profound things in words accessible to everybody without denying their complication or dissolving their profundity. Many of his short articles, published in the newsletter of this parish, are gems of this kind of simple richness. In helping to develop the work of Spode House in the 1950s he established a group for Catholic philosophers whose members have gone on to serve the Church and philosophy with distinction in many parts of the world.

The great text of Romans 8, part of which we heard as the second reading, speaks about the union of the human spirit and the Holy Spirit that is effected through the redeeming work of Christ. If Columba was a philosopher he was also a believer, a reasoning and reasonable person who was always drawn on by the gift of faith, as well as a believing and practising Christian who was always drawn deeper by the thirst of reason. As a believing philosopher he saw the need for prayer and for opening up to the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. As a philosophical believer he saw the need for argument and demonstration, for an intelligent presentation of our faith issuing from a constant, assiduous meditation on its mysteries. He did not write a learned article showing how faith and reason are each within the other. But his life was an instance of it, a believing philosopher and philosophical believer, controlled by one single movement or desire for truth and goodness.

So he was a student and preacher and teacher of philosophy and theology, given to the kind of anguish that accompanies study and teaching. That second reading also talks about the inward groaning of the human spirit, part of the general groaning of creation in its one great act of giving birth and our seeking of truth and justice is part of that travail. Columba's groaning was not always inward, of course, and neither was the groaning of those he provoked. There were very painful moments along the way, particularly in the 1960s when the Church and the Order were shattered by disagreements and uncertainties about the way forward. He was personally involved in these difficulties as the English Dominicans experienced them. Being exiled from these difficulties, in a way, freed him to begin a new

life in Glasgow where he flourished for many years until he was, as he put it, 'forcibly retired' and moved to London. In London, eventually, he flourished once again, teaching at Mill Hill, working on the parish, as chaplain to the Catholic Stage Guild and to Old Spode, and as national promoter of Lay Dominicans.

St Paul encourages us to regard such human difficulties and responsibilities, powerful and disturbing as they can be, in a Christian perspective. The human situation is that we live between fear and love, in principle freed from the power of fear, no longer in bondage and no longer slaves. We have been adopted into the family of God, as his sons and daughters, and our lives now have this orientation towards an eternal home. But for now we possess all this in hope, which is why the groaning continues, and the work of establishing truth and justice also has to continue. Columba, in my experience of him, was aware in himself of the pull in each direction, the pull back towards fear and the always stronger pull forward towards love, towards that love which God is.

Columba's following of Our Lord might seem in some ways eccentric: the flat in Glasgow more like a workshop than an apartment which he shared with his faithful dog Melchisedek, the famous road roller he bought cheaply at auction to flatten the lawns of Hawkesyard, his insistence on keeping anything and everything that might some day prove useful, buying a Victorian mattress filling machine and turning it into the mechanism for a clock. His was a simple and poor way of life, appropriate for one following also in the steps of St Dominic, a mendicant pilgrim in this world. Columba's pilgrimages to Vezelay and Walsingham after the Second World War were religious events with very clear social and political significance. His support of the campaign for nuclear disarmament was likewise an application of Catholic social teaching to a contemporary issue. He was still walking in 2003 when he joined the great protest in London against the invasion of Iraq.

People on the fringe won Columba's attention always. When the Italian prisoners of war outside Oxford needed a chaplain, Columba did it. When Hungarian refugees in a camp near Hawkesyard needed a chaplain, Columba did it. When he took part in a televised debate with a Methodist preacher and an Anglican bishop (a debate that left him irked, he said, because he was not able to do all the talking) it was a young cameraman who looked a bit lost about whom he had most to say afterwards. He had a special rapport with children, loved leading the children's liturgy here which he prepared with as much care as he did anything else and with characteristic inventiveness, organized the Easter garden in one of these side chapels, and I believe was always at the centre of youthful discussion and jollity at family gatherings. He always found time for the down and out, the neglected, and the lonely.

Columba also counted many women among his friends. Maybe it was because women too were somehow on the fringe in church and society that Columba was drawn to them. I suppose I must mention again his well-known adventure with a lady train driver at Bordeaux. This was when he was 87, got a bit confused about the direction of his travel in France and was helped by a lady train driver who offered him coffee in her cab and a free trip back to Bordeaux from where he could begin again. They became friends, this atheist mother of two and Columba, and their conversation about the meaning of life continued for some months after his return to London.

The Lord in whom he believed and who was the centre of his life, died on the fringe, outside the city. Like all disciples Columba was called to follow his Lord to the cross. A journey that began in this church in 1916 when he was baptized here ends today with the celebration of his funeral Mass. As they say in Ireland, 'he has completed his baptism'. He has followed Christ into death in the hope of sharing in the glorious resurrection of Christ. This is the hope presented so starkly yet so beautifully in the gospel reading, Mark's account of the death of Jesus and of the angel's announcing to the women that he had been raised from the dead.

In the death of Jesus we see the glory of the Son of God when our faith – if our faith – enables us to echo the words of the centurion who saw how he died: 'in truth this man was a son of God'. There is a point at which our philosophy breaks open. It is when our minds and hearts are presented with the full reality of the great central fact of human history, the death and resurrection of Jesus. The words then needed seem intolerable to some while for others they are words of eternal life. The veil that needs to be torn from top to bottom is any veil that prevents us from seeing that Jesus of Nazareth, raised from the dead, is our Advocate with the Father. He is the One who sends from the Father the gift of the Spirit who makes us live in the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Columba believed all this and faithfully celebrated these sacred mysteries. We pray for him, that God will receive him kindly, have mercy on his soul and give him eternal rest. We thank God for the graces he gave to Columba, in particular the grace of the priesthood and the grace of a Dominican vocation which enabled him to bring the light of God's truth and the comfort of God's love into many people's lives. We pray that God will strengthen us all in hope as we continue on our pilgrim way.

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