

HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL OF FR DOMINIC MILROY, OSB
11 JANUARY 2019

On behalf of Fr Abbot and of the monastic community I would like to welcome you all to this funeral Mass for Fr Dominic. Thank you for coming and in such numbers, perhaps today's greatest eloquence. I would like to welcome family members and many friends, who have come from near and far, some long journeys. I welcome Abbot Christopher Dillon and Canon Jane Brooke from Chester Cathedral. I would like to welcome those listening in through the live streaming, with perhaps a special prayer that it works properly. Among these a very particular welcome to Clare Jennings, sadly not able to be present, but who as we know over many years was a chief support of Fr Dominic and enabler of so many of the great things he accomplished. Clare, we offer you great gratitude. Our most important task, a very practical one, is for us to pray for Dominic in this Mass, for the forgiveness of his sins and for his welcome into the Kingdom of Heaven. We give thanks for his life and for all that he has meant for us.

It was not difficult to look for a gospel reading today from the gospel of John. Fr Dominic had in recent days and right up to quite soon before he died, been dictating his thoughts and reflections on the Fourth Gospel and this was an interest which in fact goes back many years. Somewhere close to the heart of this interest was the sense that in St John's Gospel a powerful and soaring spirituality – the symbol of St John is the eagle in flight – is nonetheless in play in very material and down to earth elements of the world around us.

In a chapter entitled 'The Gospel of Signs' Dominic had this to say, which I dare to think, we may take as an insight into a, perhaps *the*, key dimension of his thought and more particularly of his faith. He wrote 'In John there is no equivalent of the moral teaching and no parables [as in the synoptic gospels]. Instead, we have the 'signs' in which Jesus is deliberately linking God with elemental features of his creation – Earth, Air, Fire and Water. Jesus' attitude to created things is wholly positive. Rather than seeing the divine as 'spiritual' and as opposed to the created world of things, Jesus sees creation as a manifestation of the divine. This is where the Gospel is radically different from Gnosticism, which presupposes an opposition between the spirit and the flesh'.

So in today's gospel passage for a requiem Mass we have from John chapter 6 this bold identification of Jesus: 'I am the living bread which has come down from heaven.' Jesus has this bold, indeed shocking, identification of his flesh and blood

as our food and drink: ‘if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you ... For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.’ This is strong stuff and so right up Dominic’s street; as he put it these scraps of the created world become manifestations of the divine. This is our faith, this was his guiding faith.

Now it seems right, albeit that this is homily, not obituary, that I say something about the phases of Fr Dominic’s life and career, but I should maybe refer to something overarching, but which relates to things very material and of the world. It may sound flippant. Many, some here some unable to be here, have written in the last few days and there have been references to some of the concrete signs of Dominic’s presence for which he is lovingly remembered: the smell of pipe smoke and of a tumbler of malt, the sight of a golf club and of a fishing rod, the distinctive sound of a voice speaking and indeed singing. He was a first cantor. Material and in some cases worldly things, but of course the striking thing is that these are remembered in the context of friendship, of affection, of love and ultimately therefore of something at once very human but also of the human spirit which reaches out for, searches for, yearns for God, not yet of course in secure possession.

I dare to identify three key stages or phases in Fr Dominic’s monastic career; interestingly the first two both in turn divide into an Ampleforth and then a wider almost global aspect. The third stage is then very different.

In the first we find a monastic path from clothing in the habit in 1950 through study in Oxford to school roles: librarian, Director of Theatre (a role he loved, maybe even a favourite which he spoke about often in later years) Head of Modern Languages, Housemaster of St Wilfrid’s for ten years from 1964 to 1974, already years of social revolution. As in a powerful and complex symphony themes from this stage reprised in later life, so he was – in a new monastic dispensation – chaplain to the girls of St Aidan’s house from 2008 to 2013. This first stage came to a close though in a very individual and distinctive way when he was headhunted by the Abbot Primate to be the Prior of Sant’ Anselmo in Rome for five years to 1979, the international Benedictine house of studies on the Aventine Hill. It was a role for his linguistic and other manifest abilities in his early 40s. Abbot Edmund Power celebrated a Requiem Mass for him in Sant’ Anselmo on Wednesday, two days ago.

In 1980 what I am typifying as a second phase, years of maturity, began when he was appointed Headmaster of the College. There is so much one could say and others could do it better. There is a particularly powerful memory of Exhibition speeches leant by heart and delivered with a remarkable intensity of idea and vision. I recall one on the challenges faced by monasteries in the final decades of centuries, pointing to some particular difficulties of 1990 and 1991. You will gather that pygmies albeit standing on the shoulders of giants do not manage the same feats.

A zenith of the headmaster years was his chairmanship of HMC, the Headmasters' Conference and the staging – the right word I think but with no disparagement – of the annual conference in Bruges. When I became Headmaster here in 2004 that conference was still remembered among colleague headmasters in its totality and for some of its memorable details as a pinnacle experience. This international venture presaged how the years of maturity developed after he stepped down as Headmaster again in a global frame, as he became a retreat giver and canonical visitor – over 25 monasteries across nine monastic congregations. I should also mention that Fr Dominic was key to perhaps one of the most unlikely connections which has nonetheless proved fruitful beyond all imagining and planning processes, namely the link between Ampleforth and the Manquehue Apostolic Movement in Chile. Here too he formed key and lasting friendships and a very special one with Ignacio Eguiguren. Another unlikely but true connection is that Fr Dominic was a consultant to an animated film version of the Life of Christ which took him to Cardiff and Moscow.

Across these years of mature achievement Fr Dominic continued to do important things for Ampleforth: he was delegate to General Chapter from 1992 to 2004, and variously Master of Oblates, Secretary of Confraters (this up to his death) editor for eight years of the Ampleforth Journal, reshaping it very much in this time. He particularly valued the thirteen years from 1997 he spent as chairman of governors of St Benedict's, the voluntary aided primary school in Ampleforth Village. In recognition of many achievements, abilities and contributions he was made already in 1993 cathedral prior of Chester according to our EBC custom.

Then we come to the third phase, which crept up on him and as for many people, particularly those who have been accounted among the 'great', it is darker and more difficult. It is the time of failing powers, for him of a terribly debilitating macular degeneration that hit his ability to read and write and sing, so key to his art, and of depression about which, being him, he was able to speak very clearly. It

could be a time of great disappointment and at times of rage. His wide world painfully narrowed.

He faced the tarnishing of his own reputation in the child abuse scandals and in the very difficult material we have had to face through the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. We all here have to confront the exposure of sins and crimes committed by Ampleforth monks, and Fr Dominic himself came under direct fire for his handling of these matters. He like many of us had to face some failures in the care of children entrusted to our schools, who have been harmed. We have to apologize for these and we have to ask forgiveness; even when not directly harmers, we have to share responsibility for what happened.

In his last days in hospital in York Dominic had a very acute and very general consciousness of the desperate need, which in truth we all have, for forgiveness. If the eagle was no longer soaring, he was lying often in great pain and mental distress reaching out for God to come down to him. On the day of his fall in the monastery infirmary, in a particular agony, he wanted to sing a *Salve* for those suffering more acutely and he asked for his community list to pray for all his monastic brethren by name. Yes of course these have his taste for drama, but they are the real him. In his last moments as this new year was coming in he was wishing well cheerily to the staff and his fellow patients. He commented to one of his very many hospital visitors that whatever else there was about his condition, that his depression seemed to have lifted.

Dominic was a man who loved, he had a mind which loved. He had a mind which loved and embraced complexity and paradox. In the time since his death we have been celebrating the Epiphany. In the Benedictus antiphon at Lauds on this feast day, it is said of the Church's experience of the Epiphany 'Today the Church has been joined to her heavenly bridegroom, since Christ has purified her of her sins in the river Jordan, the wise men hasten to the royal wedding and offer gifts: the wedding guests rejoice since Christ has changed water into wine'. To say the least this is a strange passage. Why describe the wise men as hastening to a royal wedding, when nothing in the gospel text, at least on its surface, seems to speak of a wedding?

When we visited Dominic in York we were in truth visiting him on his death bed. Nothing about it suggested a marriage bed. But one of the themes that intrigued him for a long time about St John's Gospel is the wedding, the nuptial imagery. He was certainly writing about it in 2008. On Wednesday 5 December five days before his accident he said this 'The Gospel passages of Jesus' passion and death are

starkly concise and factual. It is not immediately self-evident that they are giving us an account of a supreme act of love, which is both human and divine.’ Then he has this remarkable insight: ‘Suffused with the imagery of love between bridegroom and bride, they become immeasurably richer’ ... ‘Beneath the events of the Passion there is, in John’s Gospel, a particular and powerful sub-text, hinted at but not developed. This hidden theme is that of the fruitful union between God and his people.’ Dominic reflects that in the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist had spoken of Jesus as the ‘bridegroom’ and suggests that this attribution takes on a new resonance in the light of Christ’s dying words. He draws a link between the words from the Cross ‘I thirst’ and Jesus’ encounter earlier in the Gospel with the Samaritan woman: ‘On the surface, as a dying man he is thirsting for water but, on a deeper level, he is thirsting for the fulfilment of the love between God and his chosen people’. Dominic then looked at the words from the Cross addressed to his mother and to John, the beloved disciple: ‘his extension of Mary’s motherhood to include the beloved disciple is, once again, a word that moves at two levels. At the surface what he says results in John taking Mary into his care. At the deeper level he is extending the motherhood of Mary to include not only John but all his human brothers and sisters, a new dimension of universal fruitfulness. These are Dominic’s last words in this passage: ‘The richness of the imagery here is hard to grasp. Jesus, in his humanity, is the son of Mary and brother of the whole human family. In his divinity he is the divine bridegroom. His bride is the chosen and redeemed people of God, represented here by the person of Mary. The bridal images echo the prophets and the Song of Songs’. The Song of Songs, that favourite monastic text.

Let us pray for the repose of Dominic’s soul, for the forgiveness of his sins, for his coming to the marriage feast in the kingdom of heaven, for his singing of the Song of Songs. May we come all together to everlasting life.

Fr Gabriel Everitt, OSB

Prior Administrator