

**HOMILY PREACHED BY FR JOHN DUNNE SMA, VICE-PROVINCIAL,  
AT THE FUNERAL MASS FOR FR JIMMY O'CONNELL SMA  
AT SMA PARISH CHURCH, WILTON, CORK  
ON THURSDAY, 6 AUGUST 2009-08-06**

**Readings:   Lamentations 3:17-26  
              Romans 8:31-35,37-39  
              John 6:24-35**

As we gather to mourn at the death Fr James O'Connell, together with his family and friends, we come also to celebrate the life of our brother and fellow missionary. His life can be viewed as having two major chapters: the active missionary and the retired man who suffered from Parkinson's disease for many years. While it is easier to focus on the active part of his life we acknowledge that the latter years are an integral part of the story of this good man. Our life is like a weaving or tapestry woven through the relationships we form and events that overtake us in the life time given to us by the God who created us. Death offers a time to remember and retell our stories. We turn to the wisdom and insights of sacred scripture to help us relate to the mystery of Jimmy's life and death.

The first reading from the Book of Lamentations highlights some of the realities that were experienced by Jimmy or those of us who knew him in his illness: 'I have forgotten happiness'; 'my strength has gone'; 'brooding on my anguish and affliction is gall and wormwood'; 'my spirit ponders it continually and sinks within me'. These sentiments are counterbalanced by another set of truths that Jimmy also knew in his illness: 'this is what I will tell my soul and so recover hope'; 'the favours of the Lord are not all past'; 'his kindnesses are not exhausted'; 'great is his faithfulness'.

In the book of Genesis we read about our ancestors in the faith: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. The story of Jacob's journey in his search for a wife led him to a place where he encountered a mysterious stranger who wrestled with him through the night. Their conflict was fierce and fraught with potential danger. Jacob demanded to know the stranger's name but to no avail. Through the night their wrestling continued. The stranger's blows wounded Jacob for life, but the stranger did not prevail. In the end Jacob is spared and receives the stranger's blessing, but he limps as he leaves. And in that struggle, he came to know that the nocturnal stranger was none other than God.

The sentiments from Lamentations and the story of Jacob and his wrestling provide an suitable paradigm for Jimmy's O'Connell's struggle to live his life as a man called to be a missionary; a man fired with missionary zeal in spite of the many drawback arising from his long term illness. It is in the context his search for meaning, and wrestling with himself and with issues that his glimpses of God became more real. Like Jacob, we do not always know how to recognize and name this divine presence in our midst, through the daily struggles we encounter, or how to live faithfully in response to this mystery. But, like Jimmy, we learn as we live with hope while we stay with the struggle.

The second reading highlights an important Christian virtue: hope. This is a truth expressed by saying that God is on our side in all that is happening to us. At times it may look as if that this is not the case, for example, when something like a tragedy or serious illness befalls us. St Paul speaks with authority when he declares, "I believe nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible in the person of Christ Jesus our Lord. Like Jimmy we come to know this love slowly and gradually.

The message of the Gospel is one of searching, of finding and abundance. These same words are the elements of the story of our faith. We cross troubled water, we search and occasionally we do find a treasure for which we are willing to lay down our lives. It is faith that spurs us on.

Today we celebrate our own faith and that of Jimmy. We acknowledge that faith is a gift given to us through our relationships - in family, neighbourhood and parish settings. In this Gospel passage also we hear the powerful statement of Jesus, "I am the Bread of Life. Anyone who comes to me will never be hungry; anyone who believes in me will never be thirsty".

Jimmy was blessed abundantly in his family having 4 brothers and 2 sisters. He was a Dub! He grew up in a good family. Educated in his local primary school in Clontarf and later in Christian Brothers Schools he developed a keen and curious mind. He was interested in and good at sport and loved music. Jimmy was competitive and successful. Blessed with a vocation to be a missionary priest with the SMA he worked in Nigeria from 1963 until failing health forced him to return to Ireland in 1991. In the Archdiocese of Lagos Jimmy blossomed and grew in his priesthood through ministries in education and parish work. He loved Africa and the Nigerian people and was a fluent speaker of Yoruba language.

He worked in St Finbarr's College, Nazareth College, and for a long time in St Gregory's College where he is well remembered for having encouraged all kinds of sports. He also produced an annual musical like *Jesus Christ Superstar* or the well known South Africa musical, *Ipi Tombi*. Later he moved into full time parish ministry in Agilite. His determination and commitment to values and people were evident in his work with staff, students and parishioners. Returning to Ireland he worked in our house in Maynooth, helping to train future SMA missionaries. He liked this work and got lots of energy from working with young people. He served in leadership as Deputy Society Superior in Lagos and also worked on commissions set up to evaluate our work and our formation programmes with a view to planning for the future.

Then his illness began to take its toll. He came to live in Blackrock Road but he was determined to fight it and to live life to the full despite his limitations. He availed of developing treatments and continued to be involved in life through reading and writing. He liked to express his views on current issues in his letters to the Irish Times and articles he wrote on topics like Ecology and Mission. His curious mind and strong will stood him in good stead during this difficult time. He suffered but did not lose hope. He spent many years in St Teresa's Blackrock. He was loved and cared for by the staff and those who came to visit him regularly. We thank you, Sr Margaret and staff, for this great care and you the friends for your frequent, faithful visits.

During his illness, like the disciples, Jimmy searched and crossed over the lake. During his life he lived and celebrated the Eucharist. As a missionary he shared the Bread of life with thousands of people in Nigeria and so he knew the meaning of Jesus' words, "I am the Bread of Life. Anyone who comes to me will never be hungry; anyone who believes in me will never thirst". We have reason to believe that he has now heard the call, "Come to me and I will give you rest. So we pray, may he rest in peace.

When life's journey is over we depend ultimately on God and his gracious mercy and so we commend Jimmy O'Connell to the God who re-created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth. We believe that God who raised Jesus will not refuse eternal life to Fr Jimmy. Because he believed, we pray that he will now be the beneficiary of this ultimate gift, to see God face to face and join in heaven those who have gone before him.

Pope Benedict XVI writing about the faithful departed said they are the happiest of all as they are the faithful ones who like beacons in the night now guide us in our journey through life. The journey can be difficult at times as we make our way through troubled time and difficult challenges. Jimmy was a beacon of light and hope for many in his lifetime and we believe that he will continue to be a beacon for those who remember him.

Eternal rest grant to Jimmy, O Lord. Ar dheis lámh Dé go raibh a anam dílis.