

## Homily at the Funeral of Sr Justin Cassidy

Magheramore 25 September 2015

Somehow it seems fitting that our cherished sister, Justin, should slip away on a day in Autumn. Like the quiet falling of the leaves of the sycamore or the lime or the oak trees that we see around us here each day, she too has let go and moved on to another season; “another intensity... a deeper communion.” A season of new and eternal life where death shall be no more. And so, even as we grieve her loss we thank God for the fruitfulness of Justin’s life, a fruitfulness evident even, or maybe particularly, in these final weeks. “I never saw Sr Justin frown or be disgruntled,” one of the carers here said. “She always met you with a smile, though she must have had pain at times.”

There surely is song and dance, even a *cheili*, in heaven today as those who have gone ahead of her welcome Sadie into that place of joy. And for you, her family gathered here, to whom she was devoted and in whom she took such pride, this is surely a consoling thought. The bonds of love and friendship are not severed by death; rather they are strengthened.

Our memories of Justin are of a woman whose fidelity and dedication informed everything she undertook. For example, for a time, before her final illness, she helped out in our dining room, a task far removed from the skilled work she did on the missions. But, and here is the measure of her faithfulness, she approached her charge with the same thoroughness, the same quiet dedication of someone who knew that the measure of one’s life is not the importance of the work, but rather the love with which it is done. Her model was Mary, and her heart, like Mary’s, was always focused on Jesus.

In Hong Kong, this skilled nurse ‘did all things well’, both in the Ruttonjee Sanatorium caring for tubercular patients and later in Sandy Bay where she looked after severely handicapped children. Doctors and visiting consultants remarked on her encyclopaedic knowledge of the little ones. And well they might. Justin knew not only the name of each child, and the different pathologies, but knew their family, including the ‘apos’ or old grannies who were devoted to their little mites. Blessed with indefatigable energy, she would, in her free time, no matter how hot or humid the weather, visit their shacks, or their cramped rooms in high rise buildings, to suss out what would help them. For instance, a wheelchair to fit in the narrow door, crutches maybe, or calipers. She got her brother, Fr Michael in Edinburgh to send her a particular frame for treating children with congenital dislocated hips and then got the hospital carpenter to make copies of it. Then there would be the letters. She must have pestered a great number of the principals in the Catholic schools to take in various children and educate them. How else were they to get on in frenetic Hong Kong? And, generally, she succeeded.

Justin’s fluency in Cantonese opened many doors but she was also able to speak ‘Hakka-wa’ -a dialect of fisher folk who came over from the islands. They knew she understood them and would ease their way. Her Chinese nickname was ‘*fat gong*’, meaning judge. Far from being a derogatory appellation, it spelled out for the people her utter fairness and impartiality. Whether you were a consultant or a coolie, you knew that you would be dealt a fair hand by

this remarkable woman. As the prophet Micah urged, Justin ‘walked justly,’ and treated everyone with the same respect and consideration due to each individual created by God. “What people are looking for now,” the Pope said, some years ago, “are witnesses, not teachers.” In Sr Justin, with her warm smile, her openness, we had a witness *par excellence*, a missionary whose life radiated Christ in all she said and did. No matter how tired or weary she was, after a hard day’s work, or after a day tramping in the blazing heat of Hong Kong, calling on the poor, she always spent time in silent prayer. It was the same here – Justin’s life was the Lord.

She loved music and in her younger days played the violin. She was also a very good cook and would produce a delicious meal when the occasion called for it. When the community had gatherings of past patients, all physical handicapped, Justin was a welcoming presence, her enjoyment mirroring theirs. And always – plenty of good Chinese nosh!

Letting go, as we know, is an essential part of a missionary’s life, a readiness to pull up the tent pegs, dismantle the familiar and move on. Not easy when you have spent over 30 years among a people you love, a culture now woven into your own pattern, and a familiarity, you might say, with the overcrowded, over populated, over stretched hectic streets in Hong Kong. But when the time came for Justin to say ‘Goodbye’ she did just that, without fuss, looking only to what the Lord was asking of her. Her ministry in Scotland and later here in Ireland, were undertaken with unwavering dedication. She was the last Columban sister to nurse in Dalgan Park, where again her diligence and care for the men in the Infirmary are remembered by those who knew her. “I thought I was well looked after before Justin came,” confessed one elderly priest, “But now! My goodness!” She was to show the same care to the sick and infirm here, here, the same generosity of spirit.

In her final illness, when both her mobility and her speech were impaired, we were touched by the gentleness of her spirit, her welcoming smile, her very real presence which spoke more than a million words. Here in the Nursing Home, where she was so wonderfully cared for by the nursing staff, she smiled her gratitude for all their thoughtfulness. Above all we saw grace at work in this unique and special woman in her acceptance of her condition. ‘I am all thine, my Queen, my Mother’; all was handed over, nothing was taken back.

As we say goodbye to our great-hearted sister, Justin, we do so in the sure hope of meeting her again in the Father’s house where, as, the prophet Isaiah reminds us, God will gather all his loved ones together to celebrate a great feast. No more tears, no more pain, only joy and love and laughter. And, no doubt, a grand *cheili* where the angels will join us as we step it out with Justin and all who are there before us in the Lord.

By: Sr. Redempta Twomey, SSC