

Sister Barbara O'Sullivan

Funeral 23.9.2016 Magheramore

Phil 4:7-11, Lk 24:13-35

We are come here today to mourn our sister, our aunt, our friend, our companion, Barbara who died on Monday. One morning, about ten days ago, already very frail, she smiled and said, slowly and very clearly, "In the end nothing really matters." Everything was handed over as she stood on the threshold between life and death, at peace in the certainty that soon Christ would come for her.

This was her last gift to us, her community and to you, her friends and family. She taught us that we must not fear death because, as St Paul said, "When the tent that we live in on earth is folded up, there is a house built by God for us, an everlasting home not made with human hands" (2 Cor 5:1).

So, even as we grieve here today and offer our sympathy to all her family, especially to her beloved sister, Mary, we are not without hope, believing that Barbara is rejoicing now in that everlasting home prepared for her by the Lord she loved and served so well. Like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we may now feel a certain lostness, a struggle to take in the reality of the funeral of a much loved friend. But, like them, we too will experience the joy of the Risen Lord and his peace.

Barbara was a young, vibrant woman when she left her home and her widowed mother to join the Columban Sisters in Cahiracon. It was a costly break, but with the strong faith and courage that was always to characterize her, she set out on the journey that would lead her to the other end of the earth. After training as a nurse in the Mercy Hospital in Cork she was sent to Hong Kong to minister to tubercular patients in the Ruttonjee Sanatorium. No challenge was too difficult for this spirited and intelligent woman who, with minimal Cantonese and battling daily with the sapping humidity of the climate, set up an excellent training programme for her staff so that life-saving, radical surgery could be carried out on the very ill and very poor tubercular patients. And, despite the danger of contamination, infection was unheard of under her watch.

Moving from Ruttonjee, she was appointed Matron of the recently established hospital for physically disabled children. With her managerial skills, her attention to detail and above all her love of the children this orthopaedic hospital in Sandy Bay became a centre for first class care and innovative spinal surgery. She drew on the goodness of her friends to help in the treatment of the little ones, many of whom would have been hidden away in high rise buildings, or hillside shacks. Barbara was determined to open doors for them. She and Sr Justin worked miracles, treating not only

their physical disabilities resulting from polio or tuberculosis mostly, but helping get them into schools, introducing them to people who could open doors, above all letting them know they were cherished. She visited them in their crowded homes and, at regular intervals, put on parties in the convent for them. Believe me, she was 'the hostess with the mostest'; it was not only the children who enjoyed her lavish hospitality.

In community too, Barbara shared her gifts, always willing to go the extra mile and indeed to drive that extra mile so that sisters newly arrived in HK saw a great deal more of the colony, as it then was, because of her generosity, despite the pressures on her time. A very committed missionary, she loved the Chinese people. If at times she seemed abrasive it was because she would not tolerate what she considered airy-fairy ideas. And what wonderful arguments would ensue!

At the end of her nursing career Barbara, no longer young, became the secretary to the Archbishop. Her health, which was never very robust, did not prevent her wholehearted commitment to this the demanding position. She was not only the secretary, but also the confidant, the nurse and a very great friend to the saintly Cardinal Wu who valued the common sense and the discretion of this prayerful woman. And, would you believe it, today is the anniversary of his death fourteen years ago. What a reunion these two are having now!

Barbara, no matter how demanding her schedule, or how weary she must have felt at times, lived her life with flair and style. We saw her almost crushed with pain and yet over and over again she would rise up to greet visitors or welcome sisters home from overseas missions. Old age did nothing to dim her panache; on the contrary, she blossomed as her years increased. Maybe it was her way of dealing with the chronic pain, the increasing ill health that dogged her later years here. Her love of nature, of music, of colour and style never left her. She could tell a good story, relish a hot argument and engage vibrantly in repartee with any sparring partner. Her family of course, many of you here today, were precious beyond words; she delighted in your triumphs and shared your pain. And prayed much for all of you.

You would find her in this chapel, there in there in a back seat, at regular and at irregular intervals. A woman of faith, a woman whose deep love of Christ and his mother increased with the years, she was faithful, gracious and grateful to the end. "You cannot imagine how kind the staff are," was her frequent comment. She valued each one in the Nursing Home and could not ask for a more caring group. They, like all of us here, will miss their gracious friend.

In these final weeks, as the spool of her life ran out, she seemed to enter a zone of great gentleness. She had the sweetest smile not only for us but for

the unseen presences in her room. Or so it seemed. We were, I believe, in a very thin place those last days.

As a final thought let me share some words of the American theologian Elizabeth Johnson: “Hoping against hope, we affirm that they, (our loved ones who have died) have fallen not into nothingness but into the embrace of the living God. And that is where we can find them again; when we open our hearts to the silent calmness of God’s own life in which we dwell, not by selfishly calling them back to where we are, but by descending into the depths of our own hearts where God also abides.”

Dear Barbara, may you be found dancing joyfully with the angels.

Redempta Twomey