

Homilies in memory of Bro. John Berridge, O.Carm.

Brother John Berridge died on 8th February 2002

Homily given by Elizabeth Ruth Obbard at the Evening Prayer for the reception of the remains of Bro. John Berridge, O.Carm.

I will console you like a mother caressing her son: you shall be like children carried at the breast, fondled on a mother's lap. Commenting on these words of the prophet Isaiah St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote towards the end of her own life: When God makes promises like that, what's left for us except to keep silence before him with tears of gratitude and love ... Our Lord doesn't ask for great achievements (in order for us to scale the heights of perfection), he asks only for self-surrender and for gratitude.

Our Lord doesn't ask for great achievements, only for self surrender and for gratitude. That was John.

John always said that it was Thérèse who brought him to Carmel, and there was something about him that was always "child" in the best gospel sense of the word. Those of us who knew John knew a very real person. There was no "side" to him. He was genuine, transparent, pure of heart, loving and beloved - always God's child.

And this sprang from his abandonment - his trust in God and in life. John didn't have anything else to give except for himself. He just surrendered to life as it came to him: through the years of hardship and poverty when he was a boy, through his years in the army which he loved to reminisce about, and above all through more than 50 years as a Carmelite. He surrendered himself most especially through the last years of his life as his strength waned.

For a once physically strong and active man John's self surrender in sickness can't have been easy. I would say he has shown enormous courage in accepting his disabilities, hiding much loneliness and pain behind his ever-ready smile. But whatever his physical condition John loved to give and to share. He had the gift of always making people feel welcome, whoever they were. His very presence around the place was a blessing.

John loved Carmel and he loved Aylesford, because they embodied for him the Will of God. He saw this place as the practical environment in which he was called to live out the initial self- gift he had made to God through his religious vows. In this he was faithful both to the community and to prayer.

He was faithful to the community.

Even in his last years he wanted to participate as much as possible in the life of his brothers and the life of the Shrine. He was eager to have news of pilgrimages. He was always at Community meetings, or on the watch to catch sight of Brother Michael, his old travelling companion. And he was so pleased to be able to attend nearly all the sessions of the recent Electoral Assembly, making a big effort to be there for as much as possible.

He was faithful to prayer.

In the mornings when I went into his room with his breakfast tray he'd usually be dozing, his rosary in his hands, his breviary beside him on the table. He said the whole day's Office right through first thing in the morning, from the Office of Readings to Night Prayer, as he was afraid that by the evening he would be too tired. "Do you think God will mind?" he'd often say, and I'd always reply "No, - in fact I'm sure you'll be going straight to heaven anyway." And his eyes would light up as he responded in wide-eyed wonder "Do you really think so?"

John was a Carmelite to the core – a man of prayer, a man of the people, a man of Mary – and how much he loved to be here, a foundation stone of Mary's Shrine. It was only right that he should die in his own room, in his own chair, overlooking the Shrine that he loved. In some ways John was Aylesford.

But his life was not just a life of self-surrender. It was permeated by what I can only call "an attitude of gratitude". John never took anything for granted. He was so grateful for his varied life experiences, grateful for being a part of Aylesford and all that Aylesford meant to him. He was grateful for the affection so many people showed him. He was a man easily "surprised by joy." A little gift, a fried breakfast, an outing, elicited from him the kind of response that warmed your own heart as it warmed his. He wasn't afraid to love and to be loved in return.

John once said to me "I guess we'll only know in heaven how blessed we are to have been given a religious vocation." It was his great, indeed his only, treasure. God doesn't ask for great achievements, only for self-surrender and for gratitude.

But in fact a life of self-surrender and gratitude is in itself a great achievement. It is the stuff of real holiness – not a holiness "out there" in the clouds, or in some churchy precincts – but a holiness right here in the midst of daily life, in a boiler suit, a religious habit, or confined to a wheelchair. A faithfulness through times of difficulty and pain as well as times of joy; through the diminishments of sickness and old age as well as in the health and strength of youth.

John's 81 years of life are now rewarded. He has awoken to the smile of God and to the experience of God's infinite tenderness. *I will console you like a mother caressing her son, you shall be like children carried at the breast, fondled on a mother's lap.* This is true for John NOW, because he is home where he belongs FOREVER.

Homily given by Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm., at the Requiem Mass for Brother John Berridge, O.Carm – 15th February 2002

The essence of the Carmelite life is to live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ, serving him with a pure heart and a clear conscience. To live in allegiance to Christ in loving obedience should be the hallmark of all Christians.

Christ on the Cross saves us through his loving obedience and our following of Christ is meant to reproduce that commitment of love. Faithfulness to Christ is enhanced for a Carmelite by a love of his word in Scripture and Sacrament. In this context the following of Christ helps us to become a community of disciples as we live in Christ, brothers and sisters, whose love for God is shown in loving friendship for each other.

Mary is the great Christian disciple and her openness to God's word and the spirit makes her a model for Carmelites. We see her as a sister who treasures God's word and by her loving presence enables us to hope. Her faithfulness, her openness flowing from her pondering God's word is an inspiration to us. She is strong and decisive and her life is a radical celebration of God's goodness.

As the preface of the Mass in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel proclaims: "*and in her likeness sets us before the world so that our hearts, like hers, may ever contemplate your word, love our brothers and sisters and draw them to her son.*" The faith of Mary gave her unconditional trust to live through Calvary and come to experience the fullness of resurrection.

The ideal of Carmel has inspired so many down the ages and perhaps in recent times Thérèse of Lisieux lived that vision in a striking way. Thérèse saw that her vocation was to be love at the heart of the Church and her trust in God lead her to proclaim and live the Little Way. That Little Way is a life of trust and consistency infusing love into every aspect of daily life and keeping faithful in the midst of disappointment, illness and misunderstanding. Thérèse also had a great sense of the communion of saints, they were her friends, they were alive. They were signs of love linking heaven and earth.

I mention these aspects of Carmelite life because John lived that life for some fifty-five years. John came from a loving family, his parents became Catholics when he was still very young and he knew God's saving love through their faith and devotion. When John was in the army prayer was essential to his life and he was never shy about kneeling by his bed in the barracks to say his prayers - his comrades admired his integrity.

John's first contacts with Carmel came while he was serving in the Middle East meeting Discalced friars in Iraq and visiting Mount Carmel. So it was no surprise that shortly after being demobbed in 1946 with the encouragement of his parents and the help of Fr Elias Lynch, John made his way to Ireland to start life as a Carmelite. John didn't find his first years in the Order that easy - he once told me he found it quite a struggle but once he made his final vows in 1951 the journey became easier. His time at Kinsale was a highpoint and Kinsale and the Geary family remained in his affections to the very end. However, John was overjoyed when he was told he was going to Aylesford and so from November 1949 Aylesford was to be his community until his death, 53 years of prayer and service in one place.

As I have said elsewhere, that while Fathers Malachy and Kilian were the inspiration behind the restoration of The Friars, the work could never have been achieved without the dedication of so many brothers down the years. John was one of that group working tirelessly, committed to what could seem ordinary tasks but always carried out with loving care - driving the old van to the market, the builders' merchant's, ferrying friars to meetings, emptying bins, feeding the cats and managing to stop for an occasional cuppa and cake. John showed immense patience with Priors who couldn't always keep tabs on his movements "where's John?" was the cry - while he was trying to get one extra job done or waiting patiently at Starnes for a length of piping.

In the midst of all this work John lived and loved the Carmelite Rule. He grew up with a great devotion to the humanity of Christ - the Sacred Heart. John would tell me that he missed out

on much of his early schooling so he was no good at maths but he was a great reader and the Bible became his favourite book.

He caught from Fr Malachy's inspiration a love of Our Lady and the saints – they were for him alive – his friends. All of this shaped his prayer life so that the Rosary, the Office of readings and a lively awareness of the saints kept him going. He had an amazing knowledge of the Bible and in the nicest possible way he was able to deflate Tommy Gallagher's arguments. They were great friends.

Friendship was important to John. Mary and the saints were his friends and in that spirit of unconditional love he was a warm presence to his confreres and made pilgrims and the lonely feel welcome. He was as easily recognised as Brother John whether in a white cloak leading a procession or leaning against his van in his cap and boiler suit. Of course friendship and food went hand in hand for John and if you ever travelled with him a stop at a Little Chef for an all day breakfast was *sine qua non*.

His last years saw illness, incapacity and time in hospital. If anything this was a time when his prayer life deepened. When he was in hospital he exercised a wonderful apostolate of prayer and friendship. His loving nature was answered by the care that nurses, carers and Brother Tom and Sister Beth were able to show him. It was not an easy time but he was aware that his friend St. Thérèse struggled with illness and that his final journey was like his master's, lonely and painful at times. Even though John died in the middle of doing so much, he was I think aware that he was being called. But he had lived in allegiance to Jesus, nourished by the Word of God, a faithful disciple and one who in trust served God in open hearted simplicity.

He lived in God's friendship, he was a loving friend – I pray that he may come to the fullness of life in the risen Lord and be one with his friends the saints.