

Homily at the funeral of Brother Thomas Johnston, O.Carm.

The following homily was preached by Tom's prior, Fr. Kevin Melody, O.Carm., during the funeral Mass at English Martyrs' Church in Walworth, London, on Monday 12th August 2013 (feast of Blessed Isidore Bakanja).

“Where I am, you also may be.”

These words we have just heard in the Gospel are part of Jesus' message to his disciples at the last supper conversations in John's Gospel. It was meant to give encouragement at a time when everything they believed in was falling down around them. When they were to look back at the events of those days in the light of the resurrection, they could see what the life and ministry, the passion, death and resurrection of Christ was all about. For his disciples, for those who read the scriptures or heard them proclaimed on the Lord's Day, the message was all in the light of the resurrection of Christ. These words would be meaningless had Jesus not risen from the dead. As Paul says, if Christ is not risen from the dead, all of this is foolishness. Today as we gather to say goodbye to Tom, we too look at the events of these last couple of weeks from the perspective of the resurrection. We too hear the words and trust that where Christ is, we too will be. But more than that: where he is, we are called today to be – at the service of his people, in the poor, the needy, the vulnerable.

As well as giving hope to the people at the last supper, these words can also be used as a summary of the Christian vocation. Where Jesus is, we also may be. A more Carmelite phrase would be that of the *Rule of St. Albert* which is on Tom's coffin, which reminds us all that we are called to “*walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ*”. Tom's Christian calling, his life as a Methodist before becoming a Catholic and a Carmelite, his experience of family and friends, are all experiences in his journey of following Christ, of responding to the invitation to be where Jesus is.

For Tom, family was important, and whether it was his birth family, his adopted family, his Carmelite family or the family of this parish, all of these had an important role to play in his life.

Tom was born in Glasgow in November 1963 and due to family difficulties had to be put up for adoption. He had the good fortune to find a second family who welcomed him into their home when he was still a baby, and they all moved to Harrogate in Yorkshire when Tom was still very young. His Methodist upbringing, his love of Sunday School, and his growth in knowledge and love of Christ brought him to search more deeply into his Christian vocation, and he was confirmed into the Catholic Church and from there came to seek a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ as a Carmelite. This search for a home as a Carmelite was mirrored in his search for

his natural family, and in recent years he found another family and relationships grew there too. It is good that Tom's brother Mike and his wife and extended family can be here with us tonight to celebrate Tom's life, and I hope that we get a chance to meet together in the Parish Hall after Mass this evening.

After a year as a novice in Aylesford, Tom made his first profession of vows as a Carmelite in August 1994. During this time of novitiate, the care and compassion for the sick and the elderly which characterised so much of Tom's ministry here in Walworth began to flower. His care of some of the elderly friars in the community at Aylesford was frequently remarked upon, and Tom's life as a Carmelite in simple vows saw him working as a carer both in the local community with people at home, as well as in care homes for the sick and elderly.

Tom was a student with me for a while in East Finchley and here we saw his skills in the kitchen as well as his compassion as a carer in Nazareth House.

The Carmelite house at Aylesford in Kent was very close to Tom's heart and he spent many years there serving the community and the visiting pilgrims as sacristan. Recently someone remarked to me that he brought order to the chaos of the altar servers here in Walworth, and it is thanks to Tom that so many of them are here tonight. It is only fair to say that their dedication to the ministry of the altar is a sign of the work that Tom did with them over the last five years.

Most of you here will have come to know Tom in these last five years that he has ministered in this parish. He was a shy man and someone who took his time in opening up with people. As one parishioner said to me when she heard of Tom's death, "*I was only getting to know him*". I often think that one of the graces of the Carmelite callings is that we are allowed to be who we are without any need for show or pretence. Some Carmelites can come to a community, make a great big splash, and be ready to move on when our three-year appointment comes to an end. Others, like Tom, need the three years just to look around, see what the lie of the land is and then settle down for the years to come. Tom often told me that it took him a long time to settle-in here in inner-city London, familiar as he was with the green open spaces of Kent. But in the last couple of years, he began to feel at home and began to respond to people with generosity and care. I know that there are a number of people here who were visited at home by Tom when he took them Holy Communion.

One woman whom I called to see last week used a word that I have heard a number of times to describe him: *compassionate*. I think that it is a fitting tribute to him as a Carmelite and as a Christian – to be compassionate is to be as Christ was, feeling the pain and suffering of others and reaching out to them however he could, seeking always to be where Christ is. Tom never claimed to have the answers; all he did was give what he had to those elderly and sick whom he visited. He brought them care

and compassion by spending time with them, listening to them, offering what support he could. It's only fair to say that if a cup of tea and slice of cake were on offer, he was all the more ready to spend time too, but it wasn't the cake that drew him there. Through his own sufferings, he learned to feel the sufferings of others and bring them whatever little he had to offer. In this he was truly a disciple of Christ, a faithful follower of the Gospel way. Our Carmelite tradition teaches that if we bring the little we have to God with an open and generous heart, God will do so much more than we can ever imagine.

Our second reading from Paul's letter to the Romans tells us something that is worth pondering sometime. "*The life and death of each of us has its influence on others – if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord.*" So many people told me that while they never got to know Tom, they were reassured by his quiet presence at the front of the church, week-in, week-out. Tom would be on the sanctuary an hour before Mass began, getting things ready and then sitting there in quiet prayer until altar servers and readers turned up.

Nothing would faze him, and whether only one server came along or fifteen, Tom would find something for each. So many of you got so used to seeing him sitting there in the corner, quietly preparing for Mass. This gentle presence each week was something that gave comfort to people, and despite Tom's natural shyness he was always willing to help a stranger who came in looking for help, a quiet word or even directions to the toilet. Many of you have had the opportunity to sign the Book of Condolences for Tom, which tomorrow will be given to his parents, and as I read the tributes paid to Tom, I began to realise just what a good listener Tom was. Many of the entries in the book say how good Tom was at listening to you, offering support, giving the assurance of an open ear. We are often told that the key to good communication is the ability to listen, and in that Tom showed how he imitated the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to whom he was committed to serve. His life had an influence on very many people, much more so by what he did rather than by what he said. Alive, he lived for the Lord, serving Christ in others.

Tom's listening attitude, his welcome to visitors, his desire to care for the homeless who came to the door each day for food, all show us that Tom lived his Carmelite and Christian vocation in a quiet and unassuming way. What many of you might not know is that Tom was the one who ensured that there was always food for the poor who come to our door each day. He would go to the supermarkets, purchase the food, and create food parcels to be distributed day-in, day-out. There was never a need to remind Tom that the cans were running low; he would always be one step ahead.

One of the characteristics of the Christian which Jesus praises is that of giving food to the hungry. As he says at the last judgement, "*Come, you blessed of my father,*

inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food.” It can be our firm faith that Tom will hear these words of Christ and be granted a merciful judgement.

I’m sure that very many of you here will be aware that we get many visitors from other Carmelite communities, both here in Britain and from around the world. Some are frequent visitors, others only once or twice. Since the news of Tom’s death became known, I have received many emails offering the parish and community support of prayers. A word that was used to describe Tom in almost all of them was the word “*hospitable*”. Tom would make visitors feel welcome, allow them to feel at home. He was always keen to spend time with them, telling them the things to see and do in London, showing them his garden. Some people expressed surprise that one of the symbols of Tom’s life that we were to place on his coffin was his gardening tools. In the middle of your service booklet you will see a picture of Tom’s garden, a tiny space that he used to the full to cultivate flowers, plants and, more recently, strawberries. During the week someone told me that those who like gardening will have a special place in heaven because they share in the creative gift of God. The reading that began with the reminder that our lives have an influence on others ends with the reminder that it is to God that each of us will have to give an account. I’m convinced that if we can say to God, that we shared in God’s call to us to be co-creators, there is little we will have to be ashamed of on that day of judgement.

Tom’s Christian vocation matured in his Carmelite vocation. The *Rule of St. Albert* invites us to be pure of heart, strong in conscience in our service of Christ and his people. The Carmelite is called to be armoured with the spiritual armour of our three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, with the Word of God as our constant accompaniment. Those of you who join us for Morning Prayer on a regular basis will know how well Tom proclaimed the Scripture reading for us. The *Rule* goes on to tell us that silent work, built on a foundation of the Word of God, is the way of holiness and goodness. It is a way that each of us here can travel. As a parish ministered to by Carmelites, we are all called to share in this journey towards holiness and justice. That’s what the first reading from the Book of Wisdom reminds us: Having sought to please God, God loved him ... his soul being pleasing to God, God has taken him quickly. But the same reading doesn’t fail to remind us that we can be left with questions, and those questions have been on our lips over these last couple of weeks. As the reading says, we can look on uncomprehending. We ask “Why?”, “Why now?”, “Why so young?”, and we have to admit that we don’t have the answers. All we can do is trust that “grace and mercy await the chosen of the Lord, and protection, God’s holy ones.”

So when Jesus says, “Where I am, you also may be”, I am convinced that he means more than an afterlife. What he is promising each of us is a share in his own ministry of caring for the little ones of society. Another Thomas, the one whom tradition

calls “Doubting Thomas” because he said that he could not believe in the resurrection, asked the question others were afraid to put words to. “We do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Rather than calling him Doubting Thomas, we should name him Honest Thomas. He had the courage and honesty to name the fears of the disciples, to admit that he didn’t have the answers. From his honest questioning of Christ, we get that beautiful phrase of Christ: “I am the way, the truth and the life.” This is very much for us, as a Christian community, both a statement of who Christ is, and an invitation to share in the divine life.

Jesus says: I am the way – follow me. Where I have gone, you may be too. Discipleship is about following the teacher, not simply in a physical way, but in our way of life. “Be where I am”, is what Jesus is saying to us. So too it’s echoed in the Carmelite Rule, our invitation to walk in allegiance to Jesus Christ. Jesus isn’t so much giving us commandments for the minutiae of life, but teaching us attitudes of gentleness and compassion, of care and concern, an attitude of knowing what’s important and following the Gospel way. This is what Tom did as we have heard, as we have seen from the tributes in the Book of Condolences. He was one who was a constant, prayerful, gentle presence for the people.

This is the truth of our Gospel calling, our Christian vocation, our seeking to find Christ in others who follow him. The truth that Jesus is for us is the meaning that is given to our lives when we genuinely live for others. Tom, in finding an adoptive family, a Carmelite family, latterly his natural family, and recently this family of the parish community of English Martyrs, began to know the truth that Christ offers: anyone who listens to my word and acts on it is my mother, my brother, my sister.

Tom was described to me as a quiet, reflective, gentle presence in the parish, and I believe that this flowed from his love of the Word of God.

So the divine life that Jesus offers his followers begins with baptism and continues throughout this life, until it reaches a full flowering in the presence of God. When Jesus says that he is the way, truth, life, he is offering an invitation to each of us. That is why we blessed Tom’s coffin with holy water at the door of the church, a reminder of the calling through baptism to share in the life of Christ. It is why we have the Easter Candle here too – the same light of the Christ that is given to us at baptism. It is why we gather today with a mixture of sadness and hope, grief and faith, that where Christ is, we will be too. Where Christ is, we believe that Tom is now. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.