

One of the options for prayers in the Church of Ireland funeral Liturgy contains the words, ‘In the midst of life, we are in death, of whom may we seek for succour.’

As we gather for the funeral of Denis Murphy, I just want to reverse that. ‘In the midst of death, we are in life.’ In the face of death, accepting our mortality, we come in Christian hope to celebrate life.

We come to celebrate the life of Denis Murphy. Denis spent all his working life in the building industry. In the early days working conditions were not good and workers were not always treated fairly. It was out of a personal experience of injustice that saw him out of work following the early death of his father, that Denis resolved to treat those who worked alongside him with justice and fairness. He loved wood and working with wood, he was a craftsman, setting high standards for himself, expecting high standards of those who worked under his direction – but all through that, that same spirit of fairness. Of course he loved his golf, he kept it up as long as he could. He loved the outdoors, the walk along the pier in Howth. He would have said he did a lot of his thinking and praying walking that pier. All of us would have been struck by the quiet courage and determination he brought to his illness. On one level he fought it, keeping up his golf, keeping up his walking. On another level there was a quiet acceptance; in the hospital he would have talked of mortality. The sacrament of reconciliation was for him an important step on that journey. He was of course a family man and maintained a quiet pride in his sons Ken, Terry and Denny – his devotion to Denny and those with similar needs was a source of inspiration to many.

We come to celebrate the life that Denis and Barbara shared together. They were drawn together by a shared experience of loss, as each was mourning the death of spouses they loved. At that time, Denis was in charge of the building project in the CRC and Barbara was helping with swimming at the CRC. Denis' construction team had taken over the section of the car park that the swimmers were using and Barbara had been asked by the group to go and talk to him. The rest is history as they found in each other someone who could understand the pain of loss and they went on to share 23 years of marriage. They came to that marriage out of different life experiences, different traditions. We often talk of inter church marriage in terms of difficulty, in terms of problems. Couples like Barbara and Denis show us the other side. There are differences between us but folk like Denis and Barbara show us an ecumenism that is lived out 24/7 in the nuts and bolts of daily living; in a shared life, lived out in love, built on respect and understanding for one another. So as we celebrate their life together, I offer it as a sign of hope in the life of the Church as we seek that unity that is Christ's will for us all.

In the face of death we come to celebrate life in Christ. I don't think I could talk of Denis this morning without making any reference to his beard. At this time of year, the beard began to grow in preparation for Denis' trademark appearances as Santa Claus in any number of Christmas parties around this area. Denis got great satisfaction from these appearances and the thrill and excitement of the youngsters – and sometimes the not so young. Christmas was a season he really enjoyed, both in the community and in the life of the Church. One of the Gospel passages associated with Christmas is those

wonderful opening verses of St John's Gospel. They speak of God among us in the person of Jesus Christ. We will hear those lovely words:-

⁴What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. Darkness has not had the last word in the life of Denis Murphy. Sickness, weakness has not had the final say. In fellowship with Denis, we follow a Lord who knows what death, what suffering, what loss is all about; one who knew what it was like to weep at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Not only that, he is the one who was raised triumphant over death, breaking the power of death itself. Knowing in his own person what it was all about, I find in him one to whom I can come in my own time of suffering and find real comfort, real strength and real hope.

To return to the beginning, in the midst of death we are in life. In the face of death we celebrate the life of Denis Murphy, the life he shared with Barbara and the rest of the family. In word and in the sacrament of the Eucharist we celebrate the life we have in Christ, crucified, risen and ascended, victorious over death. We do so conscious of the loss of those who will miss Denis most, his wife Barbara, his sons Ken, Terry, Denny, his sister Alice and all those who have loved him. And so as we commend Denis to God we pray for those who feel the pain of his passing. May we be signs of Christ's presence with them in the days and weeks to come, shedding something of his light in the darkness of their loss.