

We gather here today in St Mary's Church for the funeral of Alastair McMillan. We have heard the family speak with pride of one who was their father and who also became their friend. This is not just a funeral service but also a service of thanksgiving, a time to reflect on all that we have received in this quiet, understated man, as husband, as father, grandfather, friend. He grew up in a strong Presbyterian tradition – his father's Christian name of John Knox bears ample testimony to that. He was the first infant to be baptised in Howth Presbyterian Church. It came through in taking pleasure in simple things, a distrust of fuss, one who took great pride in his family. There was a serenity to him and a very practical down to earth approach. At the heart of it all, there was a simple, sincerely held, no-nonsense spirituality. One sensed that here was a man at peace with himself. Some time ago he approached me and said he wanted to sort out the details of his funeral; he asked for details of the order of service. The other day, when I called to the house after his death, the folder was produced with the finer details, choice of hymns, readings, a poem his father had written for him for his 18th birthday included in the basic structure I had left for him. For the last few years, Alastair and Muriel have worshipped here in St Mary's. In that time Alastair has made his own quiet, thoughtful contribution. He served for a while on the Select Vestry, offering his engineering skills to the Rectory project. Again, at the heart of it all a regular participation in Sunday worship – a very rare Sunday when he would not be here. He had a life long love of the sea. By all accounts that would have been his first choice of career but his father persuaded him to study engineering. He loved sailing both in competitions and in off shore cruising. He was a devoted supporter of the Lifeboat – the family have spoken of his achievements during his spell in office as Chairman and the Gold Medal he received from the Duke

of Kent. And so I think it is fitting that his coffin is draped with the Lifeboat Flag.

Alastair lived to a good age – well past the three score years and ten. He was blessed with remarkable health and strength. Still regular in his golf, his sailing, still undertaking projects. The suddenness of his death has caught us all off balance. That suddenness is a reminder of the tenuous hold we all have on life. But as I look back over his life, Alastair has left us with a lesson of living each day, enjoying his golf, his sailing, his family, his life long habits of worship. In that mix there is the contentment and peace of mind he so clearly found.

Alastair was very much a family man, the devotion and the pride was clear for all to see. And so the loss, the suddenness of that loss is all the more poignant. Those of us outside the immediate family circle come today to offer our love, our prayers, our simple presence with the family, with Muriel, with their sons John, Murray (who cannot be here) and Russell, their children and grandchildren as well as his sister Eileen in South Africa. We assure you of our love not just for today but for the days to come as you build a life without the one you love and who has loved you.

We pray that you may know something of the presence of the God who Alastair sought in worship throughout his life; that in his presence you may find peace and hope both for yourselves and for Alastair.

As we have remarked, Alastair was a man who loved the sea.

The following is a poem that sets our hope for Alastair and for ourselves in the context of the sailing traditions of this place

A Parable of Immortality.

I am standing by the seashore.

A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze
and starts for the blue ocean.

She is an object of beauty and strength,
and I stand and watch

until at last she hangs like a speck of white cloud
just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says, ‘There she goes!’

Gone where? Gone from my sight - that is all.

She is just as large in mast and hull and spar
as she was when she left my side
and just as able to bear her load of living freight
to the places of destination.

Her diminished size is in me, not in her.

And just at the moment when someone at my side says,
‘There she goes!’,

there are other eyes watching her coming,
and other voices ready to take up the glad shout :
‘Here she comes!’