

Last Friday, Albert Cullen died peacefully and I received a call from the family and the process of planning his funeral got under way.

Albert had not been well for the last while but he was still looking after himself in his own home. A bereavement, however much we may anticipate it, always carries with it a sense of shock, of loss, of sadness. Someone who has been so much part of our lives is now gone and a gap is left that no one else can fill in quite the same way. It is also a time of a gathering together of memories, the things that made a loved one special, their talents, their weaknesses, their love, their humour. As we gather these memories, our remembering promotes thankfulness, gratitude, to the one we have lost, to God himself. And there is a lot to be thankful for.

Albert was born on the south side of the city and attended the old Mountjoy School. He went into the water treatment business and set up his own company Albert Cullen & Co that he ran for many years and was well regarded by his business associates. He and his wife Peggy set up their home here on the north side of the city, settling down in Kilbarrack. Here they reared their four children Andrew, Paul, Craig and Nicole. A keen sailor, he was a former Commodore of the Kilbarrack Sailing Club with a particular interest in encouraging Junior sailing as well as being an accomplished sailor in the GP14 class. With the closure of the club at Kilbarrack, he transferred to Howth and joined the Folkboat class. Over the following 20 years he and his sailing partner the late Neill Soffe formed a very successful partnership in the boat 'Anoushka' and served for a year as Rear Commodore.

We have thought of Albert as business man, as sailor – fields in which he knew success, in which he earned respect of all he met. Albert was also very much a family man. Peggy, the love of his life died some 13 years ago. The family has also known great sadness in the loss of Nicole in her teens and Craig more recently.

It is a measure of the man that over the last couple of days, people have spoken to me of sadness on Albert's part but never anger, never bitterness.

The family has chosen as our reading for today that passage from Ecclesiastes – 'For everything there is a season'. In this we find the whole sweep of life's experiences before God. There is hope and despair, love and conflict, healing and pain – all human life is there. Behind it all there runs a search of meaning in this complicated business of living.

It is hard, particularly in a time of loss to find meaning; meaning in the loss of a child, meaning in the loss of a parent, a life partner.... The writer talks of a rhythm of life. Where do we find hope, where do we find meaning? I often think we begin that search with each other, we begin with love in which we support each other in our loss. St Paul, talking of love, writes to the Church in Corinth:

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant
⁵ or rude. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,
endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.

1 Cor 13.4-8

So today we, your friends and those who love you, come to offer you our love, to assure you of our prayers in the days and weeks to come.

On the wall just beside the door of this Church you will see a climbing rose. Even in the midst of winter, there always seems to be signs of life on that bush, a few leaves and buds and even the odd flower. The darkness and cold of the winter can never suppress the life of that rose. Then as spring comes the life within it will burst forth. We are approaching the season of Easter. But before that comes Good Friday and Calvary – a seemingly pointless, savage death of goodness – but love, life triumphs over darkness, over death. It is in that cycle of death and resurrection that I begin my own search for meaning, for hope. Therein lies our hope for Albert, for all those who have gone before us in the faith as we look to a Lord who knows,

really knows in his own person what it was to grieve the death of his friend Lazarus, to know loneliness, suffering, death itself and triumph

So this day we not only bring our sadness at our loss before God, we also bring our memories and thanks giving for the life of Albert Cullen and all that he has meant to family down through the years, his love, his friendship, his loyalty. We come to pray for his family, his sons, Andrew and Paul, his sisters Audrey and Muriel and all those who loved him

We gather to set his life and our lives in the context of our faith in a loving and living God as we commend Albert, father, grandfather, brother and friend into the hands of a loving heavenly Father. With his passion for sailing, I will just close with this 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 sun 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!'