

This time of year, as we approach the Feast of Christmas is a time that was very much enjoyed by the lady whose memory we honour today. Gwen Holmes dies very suddenly in her home on Saturday night. She died very much alive, still enjoying friends, still making plans, still enjoying travel, still looking forward.

She was certainly looking forward to Christmas. Christmas is one of those seasons that would have appealed to Gwen on every level. It is a time for coming together of family and all the traditions that go with it. It is a time of celebrating with friends and Gwen and Peter were wonderful hosts. Of course it is a time of celebrating faith. Gwen and Peter were very much at the heart of the life of this Parish. Loyal members of the choir, regular in worship Sunday by Sunday.

Gwen and Peter went back a long way. Yorkshire through and through – that lovely no nonsense approach to life, taking life in her stride, even the loss of her beloved Peter – and of course the accent that never left her. Born in the village of Brockholes in Yorkshire, they had gone to the same School, members of the same Parish. It is here in the Parish Church that Gwen developed her love of Anglican worship. She would often talk with great affection of the slightly spikey Parish Church she attended and her love of the Psalms and the canticles – it is only appropriate that we include these in our service today.

That love of music went right through her life. Gwen and Peter were stalwart members of the Clontarf Musical Society and loved the Gilbert and Sullivan

productions. Parties in the Holmes house would always end up around the grand piano. She came to love Howth and this place and the community that gathers here to worship. She loved company and was very good company herself and really enjoyed her membership of the Peninsula Society. A faithful member of the choir here in St Mary's, only absent when away on holidays or through ill health, she will be sorely missed. A number of years ago, the choir made a tape. Gwen sang a solo verse in their rendition of 'Praise my soul the king of Heaven.'

They moved to Ireland when Peter came here to work for ICI before setting up his own business. It is here that they reared their family, Mark, Lindsey, Nikki and Sean. Family life was very important to Gwen and she would speak with great pride of all her children and her grandchildren and with great affection of her children's partners. She was very much at Peter's side, helping him as he established his business. In their retirement they enjoyed travel, including several of Frank Blennerhassett's trips, and of course holidaying with friends. Gwen was very much by Peter's side as his health deteriorated and he eventually died. They were very much a couple and she missed him very much. But she brought something of that Yorkshire down to earth approach even to this. I recall her saying, 'Don't worry about me Kevin – I'll be all right. I've got a good family, I've got good friends. I make sure I get out of the house at least one part of every day.' She continued in Church, she continued to travel, she continued to retain her independence.

So we give thanks to God for Gwen Holmes, for the many different ways in which she has touched all our lives. We come to offer our love and our

sympathy to those who will miss her most, her children Mark, Lindsey, Nikki and Sean and their families. In these coming days, there will be many memories of Gwen as mother, as grandmother, as mother-in-law, as friend. There will be things that will bring a tear, there will be things that make you smile. May God be with you in the tears and in the laughter as you recall with thanksgiving a loving mother, grandmother and friend.

We come to set the mystery of death in the context of our Christian faith. We are approaching Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Gwen would always be here, at the Carol Service, at Christmas. Year by year she will have heard those lovely words from St John's Gospel:-

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

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

Standing as we are in the face of death, we are reminded that darkness has not had the last word in the life of Gwen Holmes. Sickness, weakness, even death itself has not had the final say. In fellowship with Gwen, we follow a Lord who knows what death, what suffering, what loss is all about; one who knew what it was like to weep and 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.

I will close with a prayer that brings home to me the hope that we have in Christ for ourselves and for those who have gone before us in the faith.

We give them back to thee, dear Lord, who gavest them to us. Yet as thou didst not lose them in giving, so we have not lost them by their return. What thou gavest thou takest not away, O Lover of souls; for what is thine is ours also if we are thine. And life is eternal and love is immortal, and death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. Lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly; and draw us closer to thyself that we may know ourselves to be nearer to our loved ones who are with thee. And while thou dost prepare for us, prepare us also for that happy place, that where they are and thou art, we too may be for evermore.