

This morning we have gathered here in St Mary's for the funeral of Joan Byrne, a dearly loved mother, grandmother, friend. At the end of a long life graciously lived, we come to remember with thanksgiving one who has been taken from us, one we have loved and whose love has sustained us, one who has been part of our lives. Along with our thankfulness we come with a very proper sadness and loss. However much we know the end is coming, however much we want the suffering of a loved one to be over, there is still that loss, that gap in our lives that no one else can fill in quite the same way. Those of us outside the immediate family circle come to support those who will miss her most, her children.

We come to set the mystery of death in the context of our Christian faith. I begin with the Festival of Easter that has just passed, with life triumphant over death that lies at the heart of our faith. In this I am reminded that 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.

A passage I often find myself turning to at a time of a funeral is from St Paul's second letter to the Church at Corinth. the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5. In this Paul presents us with the reality of our own mortality and death, he talks very plainly of the body wearing out. But just as he talks of the reality of physical decline and death, Paul talks of our new heavenly home.

The words that really stand out for me are ; "So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." This is our hope for Joan Byrne, that all the limitations of these latter years, the frailty, the forgetfulness, along with all the limitations that go with being human are "swallowed up by life", that is our inheritance in Christ.

The family have shared with us memories of Joan, with many gifts and talents. I have only known her in the latter stages of life, at that stage a life dominated by illness and decline. In my early days here I remember a bright cheerful lady coming into Church for the 9:30, brought there and collected by her husband Cyril. I recall hospitality in the home, obvious pride in her children. Brought up in Clontarf, she had worked in Sealink and it was there she met her husband Cyril, eventually moving out here to Howth with the Colin and Carolyn. Her life was very much focused on the family and on the home. Not an active sportswoman, she none the less enjoyed watching sport and on occasions would have travelled with Colin. The decline when it came must have been hard for the family to watch, hard for Joan herself. Cyril has provided us with a wonderful example of patient and compassionate love.

Those of us outside the immediate family circle come today to offer our love, our prayers, our simple presence with the family, with Cyril, with their children, Colin and Carolyn and the grandchildren. 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 peace and presence of God, that in his presence you may find peace and hope both for yourselves and for Joan.

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.