

We gather here this morning for the funeral of Mrs Jocelyn Coghlan, who died as she lived, quietly and without fuss, in Howth Lodge Nursing Home where she had been a resident for many years. In the five years or so in which I have been visiting her, my experience of her has been one of frailty, of weakness. Then people started to ask me, ‘Have you come across Jocelyn Coghlan yet? It’s a pity you never got a chance to meet her in earlier years.’ and I would hear stories of a remarkable woman. She came into the Church of Ireland on marriage – her initial background would have been in the Christian Brethren. One sensed, even in the most recent visits, that prayer, the familiar words of the old Prayer Book, touched something deep within her. She quickly settled into the life of St Mary’s and made her own particular contribution. Her husband was to die at an early age and she was left to rear their two sons, Rex and Terence. There was clearly a devotion in her life and she did all in her power to give them a good education and start in life. She was one who obviously enjoyed company, a hand of bridge, the garden, swimming picnics organised on the beach at Sutton dinghy club, a lady who, in her 60’s, decided to learn French. People have spoken to me of hospitality, of an open house where you were made to feel welcome. Her son Rex will share family memories of Jocelyn Coghlan.

For Jocelyn, as well as for Rex and Terence, this last number of years have not been easy. Not easy for Jocelyn as she lost her independence; not easy for Rex and Terence and they watched the slow decline of one who had been such a rock in their lives. I was always struck by the very obvious love and affection between them.

On an occasion such as this I often find myself searching for a verse of scripture that draws my thoughts together. I found myself turning to the First Letter to Timothy. The Apostle gives his advice to the younger man:

But as for you, man of God, pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. *1 Tim 6:11 ff*

‘pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.’ This seems to me to draw together so many of the memories of the Jocelyn Coghlan that I was never privileged to know, that I know so many of you remember today with love and affection. Jocelyn fought the good fight, not just in the recent years of decline but all through life as she overcome the hurdles of early widowhood, building a life for her and her sons.

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. Soon we will hear those lovely words from St John’s Gospel:-

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.

Darkness has not had the last word in the life of Jocelyn Coghlan. Sickness, weakness has not had the final say. In fellowship with John, 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.

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 Jocelyn Coghlan, that all the limitations of these latter years, the frailty, along with all the limitations that go

with being human are "swallowed up by life", that is our inheritance in Christ in the closer presence of our heavenly Father.

Jocelyn must have spent many happy hours looking out over Howth Harbour from her home. The following is a poem that sets our hope for Jocelyn and for ourselves in the sailing tradition of this lovely 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 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!'