

We have come here today to remember before God Madge O'Neill who lived in this community of Howth for many years. Wife and companion of Bill, mother of Michael, Anne and David, teacher, friend – most of all, herself, Madge. I first came across Madge nearly 40 years ago when Rachel taught briefly in Sutton Park prior to our marriage. She took great pleasure in telling us over the years that when in College she had gone on a blind date with my father in law, Rev Tommy McIlroy. Tommy didn't go past the first date.

Madge had lived a long and fruitful life. At the end of a life such as this there is a very proper sadness for those who loved her most – we think particularly of her husband Bill, their children Anne, Michael and David and their families. We ask God's blessing upon you, that you may know something of the presence and peace of Christ with you on this day and in the days to come.

But this is also an occasion to remember with thanksgiving the life of this wonderful lady. A native of Northern Ireland, where she trained as a teacher, Madge travelled widely. She would often speak with great affection of her time in Australia where she spend a very happy 5 years. She returned home to be closer to her parents and here she met and married a young Presbyterian minister, the Rev Dr William O'Neill. So began a partnership that was to last for 63 years. They lived in the Manse in Athy before coming to Howth and Malahide. Here they reared their family of Anne, Michael and David.. The home and the family were very important to Madge and she would speak with great affection of all her children and grandchildren.

She had an instinctive love of children that showed itself in her life as a teacher, first in Everton School on the Crumlin Road in Belfast where she taught following her return from Australia and finally in Sutton Park School. A few years ago she received the following letter form a former pupil.

Letter

She came to love this community of Howth and was very active in the life of the wider community. For 15 years she acted as local coordinator of the collections for UNICEF in Sutton.

She was always alongside Bill in his ministry. For many years she taught in Sunday School, played a leading role in many Church organisations. She was always though much more than the traditional minister's wife, making her own distinctive contribution to the life of the congregation and local community. She was very much her own person. I will always remember the impish smile that bore witness to a delightful sense of humour. She also had a strong sense of right and wrong and was quick to spot hypocrisy.

Over the last few days a number of people have shared memories with me. One that comes through again and again is her spirit of hospitality, one person recalling with me a lovely phrase she used to use, 'It is lovely to see your face.' That bears its own witness to the warmth and sincerity of her welcome. Many will recall her compassion and listening ear to anyone in trouble.

Underpinning all this was the sincerity of her Christian faith. She would often speak of her simple and uncomplicated faith; a faith that underpinned her whole philosophy of life, that took her through the trials of life. For the last few years Madge and Bill worshipped here in St Mary's and she quickly found a place in our affection and we were struck by her quiet courage and humour in the face of growing immobility, always here whenever possible, making her own contribution to the fellowship of this place.

Then of course the physical decline was followed by the drift into dementia. That must have been hard for Madge, hard for Bill and the family to watch. Even in the dementia something of the old Madge still shone through.. 'How are you? How's the family?'; the smile directed at Bill. The family

maintained a lovely ministry of care in their visits, taking her out of the home whenever possible.

We each come here with our own particular memories, our own reasons to give thanks to God for the life of Madge O'Neill. Those of us outside the immediate family circle come to support with our presence and our prayers those who will miss her most. Her husband Bill, their children Anne, Michael and David and their own families. We offer you our love and support not only in the present but in the months to come.

Death, the death of a loved one, is one of the mysteries of life and we come to set it in the context of our Christian faith. A passage I often find myself turning to at a time of a funeral of someone who has lived to a great age 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 Madge O'Neill, that all the limitations of these latter years, the physical immobility, the mental frailty that marked her closing years, along with all the limitations that just go with being human are "swallowed up by life", that is our inheritance in Christ in the closer presence of our heavenly Father.

As I said, Madge came to love this community and village of Howth. She loved to look out at the harbour from the apartment, loved to walk down the pier and talk to people, rejoicing in meeting people she had known for years, folk she may have taught as children. I also spoke of her simple uncomplicated faith. I will close with a piece that I think would have chimed with faith and also her love 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 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!'