

We gather here this morning for the funeral of Mrs Millie Brown, who died as she lived, quietly and without fuss, in Brymore Nursing Home where she had been cared for over the last two years. Prior to that she had been cared for in her home off the Kilbarrack Road by her family who were determined that, even with the advance of dementia, she would remain as long as possible in her own home, retaining her own independence. In the eight years or so in which I have been visiting her, my experience of her has been one of frailty, of weakness. When I first visited her I was accorded a cheery welcome, she took me out into the garden which she still loved and managed to enjoy. She spoke of growing up in Bagnelstown, the garage she helped run with her father. I knew even then that I was only getting part of the story. I have since heard family members refer to a ‘Trojan, a powerful woman, nothing phased her.’ She may well have been small in stature, but she was still able to handle 45 gallon drum of petrol, pumping the petrol up into the glass cylinders of the old petrol pumps for dispensing to customers. A very talented woman, self taught artist, great hands that could be turned to all manner of crafts. A very compassionate woman, visiting relatives and latterly her husband in hospital. On marriage she and her husband had come up to Dublin, settling initially in Grosvenor Road, Rathmines. There, she and her husband reared their family of Daryl, David, Helena, Nigel and Arlene. Widowed at an early stage in marriage, her family were her life, her children recall times of love, of laughter, of fun. As someone said on Saturday she enriched everyone’s lives.

Over 30 years ago she moved with the family to the house in Kilbarrack Gardens where she was to live until 2 years ago when, following a fall, it was felt that the time had finally come when she would need full time care. She is remembered on the street and in this Parish community as a lovely, happy, dynamic woman, always ready to help, to listen.

For Millie, as well as for her children, this last number of years have not been easy. Not easy for Millie as she lost her independence; not easy for her children as 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. Over these last

few days leading up to and following her death, it has been my privilege to listen in on memories and gain a picture of the Millie Brown I was never privileged to know, who so many people remember today with great love and affection.

We come to set the mystery of death in the context of our Christian faith. We have recently celebrated Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God among us in the person of Jesus Christ. We are now moving out into the season of Epiphany with its themes of light. Yesterday, in our Gospel reading, as we read of the beginnings of the ministry of Jesus and his gathering disciples around him, we were reminded of words of the Prophet Isaiah:

the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.”

In one sense a light has gone out in the lives of those who loved Millie Brown

Darkness has not had the last word in the life of Millie Brown. 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 of one who has known the reality of physical and mental decline 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

Millie, 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.

Millie died aged 90, she had lived a good life, a life that had touched and enriched the lives of many people. In recent years she had experienced decline and we know her death is a release from strain, from struggle, from this mortal life. Much as we know it is a release, there is a huge gap left in our lives, the things we used to do for her and with her, the times we shared with her, opportunities of tenderness and affection. In a sense part of our grief is not for Millie but for ourselves as we contemplate life without her closer presence, her smiles, her laughter – all this is part of a perfectly proper grief and sadness as we entrust her to the loving care of her heavenly Father. Part of our loss also involves an acceptance of our own mortality. I am just going to close with a prayer that holds together our loss and our mortality:

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.

William Penn (1624-91)