

I remember going to see Orla shortly after she got news of her diagnosis that the cancer was back. She was getting me a cup of tea in the kitchen in ‘Green Ivies’ while she cleared a cat off the counter and gave off to a dog. She paused and looked straight at me and said, ‘Well I can either fight this or go and jump off the nearest cliff.’ Fighting for Orla meant living a normal life, not allowing the illness (which she knew full well was serious) to totally dominate her life. OK there were the hospital visits, the treatments that made her feel lousy and I have no doubt there were her dark times – but there was still a house to run, horses, dogs, cats, chickens, parrots, pigs and goodness knows what else to look after, a family to organise, friends and family to enjoy. All who have known her during this time will speak of her no-nonsense, can-do, will-do approach to life.

Today family and friends gather here in St Mary’s Church for her funeral. Funerals are occasions of sadness for they mark the loss of one we have loved, who has loved us. Their parting leaves a gap in our lives that no-one else can fill in quite the same way. They are also occasions to celebrate the life, the love, the energy of the one who has died. What are your memories of Orla Ennis – as wife, as mother, as sister, as friend? In the course of this service I would invite you to come before God with your own particular memories of Orla and give thanks to God for the various ways in which she has enriched our lives. Her family has its roots in this place, she was very much a native of Howth. Her father had died while she was still young. She and her brother Ian were brought up by their mother Muriel and Aunt Rene who are both still remembered with great affection in this Parish.

In time she met Francis Ennis. They married and set up home and reared their five daughters, Stephanie, Sarah, Suzanne, Niamh and Nicola. The family was at the heart of her life. She might scold, she might give off but she was always there to help, to encourage, fiercely proud of all they achieved. There is no doubt she will be sorely missed. Throughout her illness she has shown remarkable courage and resilience. Over the last couple of months she was surrounded and upheld by the love of the family. In this regard Stephanie has asked me to express on behalf of the family in Green Ivies their gratitude to Orla's sister-in-law Judith for her very practical love and friendship to Orla over these difficult times.

Those of us outside the immediate family circle, friends and colleagues from business, from sailing, from the world of horses, from the wider community have come today to offer our love and support to Francis, to Stephanie, Sarah, Suzanne, Niamh and Nicola, to Ian, to Judith and all those who loved this very ordinary yet extraordinary person, to assure you all of our love and prayers not just today but in the weeks and months to come as you build a new and different life for yourselves without Orla.

We come to set the mystery of death in the context of our Christian faith. Here in Church we celebrate the great festivals that celebrate the great events of our faith, the goodness of God, the love of God. And here we mark the great events of life; we celebrate births, the love that leads on to marriage; here we seek strength and comfort in the face of the uncertainties of life, of illness and

death. Orla would have laid no claim to regular attendance but this place was still her spiritual home and Christmas was one of those occasions that Orla loved. At Christmas we 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.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

What we are declaring today is that darkness has not had the last word in the life of Orla Ennis. Sickness, weakness has not had the final say. Her body may be spent but Orla lives on. In fellowship with the Apostle 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.

Having grown up in Howth, with a love of sailing and of the sea, I find this poem a lovely expression for our hope for Orla and for ourselves expressed in the sailing traditions 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!’