

I will always remember my first visit to the Orchard on Claremont Road not long after I arrived here in 2005. I was invited it with great courtesy and questions about where I was from, my wife and family and their interests, what Parishes I had served in. She spoke of her own life, her late husband and family and her own convictions. Then she looked at me and asked, ‘This business of Church ordaining gay people – what is your line on it?’ I began to gather my thoughts and she continued, ‘For the life of me I cannot understand the problem.’ The hair might have been white, ill health may have limited her physical energies, but I realised I was in the presence of a free thinker. I must admit I always enjoyed a visit to Shelagh Wilkinson.

Shelagh was something of a ground breaker in her day. She was among the first of a new breed of social workers, studying social sciences in Trinity. In the early years she worked in the slums in the centre of Dublin City. In the aftermath of the War she worked among Jewish refugees and maintained a contact with one particular Jewish family in Summerhill. She maintained a life long interest and concern for the under dog. In the early years of marriage she looked after an uncle and aunt who had been freed from a Japanese Wartime Internment Camp. She had a passionate interest in issues of justice and would have had no time for racialism, sectarianism, homophobia and the like. She was involved in the early days of Samaritans and would have given freely of her time. There was always a very practical outworking of her commitments. In recent times her interest in ecological issues lead her to install geothermal heating system in her house. She knew she would never live to see the economic return but it was for her a statement of her conviction that we all have a responsibility to make a difference.

Shelagh was very much a family person. She married her husband Norman when she was 21 and they shared over 50 years together. They reared their four sons, Steve, Shane, Jamie and Hugh in the house on Claremont Road and she would often talk with great affection of her sons and their families. Being a voracious reader (even in latter years there were never the same books on the table whenever I went to visit her) and enquiring mind, she encouraged her sons to do the same, to develop their own interests, their own personalities.

Her son Steve died unexpectedly in 1985 and she and Norman took on the role of love and support of Steve's widow and their children and a special bond has been maintained ever since.

For the last number of years there has been a progressive decline in her physical health, placing severe limitations on her mobility and independence. But there was no self pity in Shelagh. She demonstrated considerable courage and maintained a positive outlook. A couple of years ago – after a spell in hospital that everyone thought indicated that Shelagh's time was short, I recall calling with her and she announced; 'I think I am dead from the neck down but alive from the neck up – which is the way I would prefer it to be.' She was grateful to those who enabled her to maintain her independence, her sons, with Hugh living in the coach house and the team of carers. She was immensely grateful for the care she received from the out patient team of St Francis' Hospice. Their loving and professional care gave her a quality of life than enabled her to continue in her own home, to welcome and entertain friends and to die, as she would have wished, in a quiet dignity in her own home.

There is much here to be thankful for in the life and example of Shelagh Wilkinson. On this day, we not only give thanks for Shelagh, we offer our love and support to those who will miss her most, her sons and grandchildren who meant so much to her and to whom she meant so much. However much we may anticipate the death of a loved one; however much we may know in our hearts that for them death is a release, there is still that sense of loss and sadness that one we loved and cherished is with us no more. It is our hope and prayer for you all that you may know something of God's peace this day.

Shelagh was not one for abstract and obscure theology but I feel she could identify with the very practical words of Paul to the Church at Corinth in his second letter. He talks very plainly of mortality, of the physical body wearing out. Shelagh would have spoken of the body being a vehicle. Paul uses an expression that has always appealed to me: 'So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.' Shelagh did not allow weakness and sickness to be the determining feature of her life. The body may have died but her love lives on, the inspiration she has given over the years lives on. I appreciate that Shelagh cannot question or contradict me on this occasion, but more than all this, I am convinced that the vitality that was hers lives on and so it is with a thankful heart that I commend this lady this day to the loving care of Almighty God.

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.