

Like so many of you here today, I was very saddened to hear of the death of Wesley Bell after a spell in the Royal Victoria Hospital. We gather here in St George’s Church to remember, to come before God with our own particular memories of Wesley Bell, to offer our sympathy to his daughters Jaine and Ellen. Before I go any further, I would just want to express the gratitude of the family and myself for the hospitality that has been so graciously offered to the family by the Rector and Parish of St George’s. A hospitality that is so much part of the tradition, the DNA of this Parish.

Where do we begin with Wesley Bell? I first came across him when my wife Rachel and Wesley’s late wife Kate were first learning bridge. So my first experience was hospitality. I soon learned that when you appeared at the house in Dillon’s Avenue, a space was cleared on the kitchen table, the kettle went on and whatever happened to be in the tins was produced be it mince pies, digestives, crackers and cheese. And the chat would begin – could be politics, could be family, could be Church or just life. To that chat he brought an insightfulness, honesty, a wonderful wit – we shared an appreciation for Spike Milligan – an ability to put his finger on the nub of an issue. You might not always agree with him but any difference would be with respect.

Wesley was a born teacher. He not only had a thorough knowledge of his subject, he enjoyed sharing that knowledge. My wife, as a maths teacher, would have brought problems to Wesley and was always struck by his patience and clarity of thinking. He set high standards for himself and would have expected high standards of others. Over coffee I would have heard some fairly withering comments on those who did not pull their weight, not to mention the

University authorities. With that came a compassion, an understanding for students who might have been struggling, advice on where to get appropriate counselling. Or simply giving someone a lift home when they were sick. A former student, on hearing of Wesley’s death, told the family: ‘we were very fond of your dad and loved his independent, mischievousness and sharp intellect...’ And another: ‘‘Wesley was one of our favourite lecturers. He always chatted to us before and after class and was a great teacher and person.’

He was of course a husband and father to Kate and to Jaine and Ellen. Born in Derry, with connections to St Columbs Cathedral and proud of that tradition. He had a strong idea of what was right, what was wrong. He would have had an impatience with any sort of hypocrisy. He met and married Kate and so began a lifelong companionship. Kate’s sudden death was a huge blow from which he probably never recovered. During this time Jaine and Ellen were a rock of strength to him. In turn, Jaine and Ellen remember a loving father, listening ear, dropping all to give lifts, one who took an interest and also drew them into some of his projects – even if at times they weren’t fully aware of how much they were being drawn in

Was he perfect? Of course he wasn’t – he could be stubborn, irascible. I gather neighbours watched nervously as he worked on the roof of his shed, only days before his first stroke – but then you could not get a work man to do the job the way that Wesley wanted it done. Gifted with a wonderful pair of hands, jobs were done in the house to perfection – it just took a littler longer than Kate and the family might have anticipated at times. So we’re not

remembering a plaster caste saint, we are remembering a wonderful warm human being in all his strengths and weaknesses.

We gather not just to remember, we gather to offer our love, our sympathy, our prayers, our simple presence with those who will miss him most, especially his daughters Jaine and Ellen. For Jaine and Ellen, it has been wonderful to talk with people who have known Wesley and Kate, to laugh, to smile, to remember. Perhaps one of the best ways to remember Wesley, will be to keep them in our thoughts and prayers.

A funeral, as we gather to say farewell, is a reminder of our own mortality. The lessons we have read today bring together two essential themes in our thoughts. The passage from Ecclesiastes takes an honest, no nonsense look at life, the rhythm of life, the pattern of life and death, of peace and conflict. Wesley was not one for platitudes so I think this passage would have appealed to Wesley. In our Gospel reading, we find disciples questioning, trying to get their heads around what is happening. Jesus listens and speaks words of hope into their questioning:

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

As, in love and thanksgiving, we commend Wesley to the loving care of Almighty God, our hope and prayer for him and for Kate, for Jaine and Ellen is peace in the presence of God and of each other.