

FR JONATHAN'S FUNERAL

Not too long ago someone asked me if I had ever been in any dangerous situations? I answered yes. "So, what is the most dangerous situation that you found yourself in?" they asked. It didn't take me long to respond that one of the most dangerous situations that I find myself in regularly is preaching! Does that sound strange? Preaching is a dangerous business. Why? Because when we preach there is a real danger of falling into the trap of 'preaching ourselves' rather than Christ. We fail to point to Jesus and think more about being popular, entertaining, or appearing clever and gifted. Pope Francis in '*Evangelii Gaudium*' reminded us:

"...preaching should guide the assembly and the preacher to a life changing communion with Christ...the Lord, more than the preacher, will be the centre of attention."

If that is true of the homily in general, it is particularly true when we preach at a funeral. This is a very dangerous moment. I am bound to disappoint someone who thinks that I have not said enough, or that I have missed out significant details or I was not honest enough. There is a danger of concentrating too much on the person, in this case Fr Jonathan, and turning the homily into an appreciation of him and a preparation for his canonization rather than highlighting how his life drew people to Jesus. So, from the very outset let me make it clear this homily is not primarily about Fr Jonathan. He would be the first to give me that advice, as he did when we spoke about it. The very fact that you are here at this Requiem Mass is testimony enough to how very much he was valued, loved, and appreciated. You are the homily because of your presence and the testimony you could give.

Our focus however is Jesus and the great proclamation of the good news. It was after all that '*good news*' that fired and gave energy to Fr Jonathan's vocation and ministry. Each time he proclaimed the Gospel and preached; Fr Jonathan was aware that not only had he been anointed but he was anointing others with the power of God's Word. That is what proclamation, testimony means. In Hebrew the word for testimony is 'edut' which means '*do it again with the same power and authority*'. Every time, therefore we speak out, read a testimony, or proclaim the Word of God we literally are saying: Lord, 'do it again' with the same power and authority.

Before I left on my recent trip to Zimbabwe, I called in to see Fr Jonathan. Both of us knew that his health was failing, but both of us knew that everything was in God's hands, and we were at peace with what would happen. He shared how sad he was, perhaps even angry, when I first suggested that it was time for him to leave Leyland where he had been for so many, many years. Time to return to the Abbey a place he had left in 1973 for his first parochial appointment, the first of many.

Yet whether he was teaching history in the College or involved in pastoral ministry at St Mary's Warrington, Ampleforth Village, St Mary's Bamber Bridge or St Mary's Leyland he brought to each of those tasks the deep conviction that we heard so clearly revealed by Paul in his letter to the Roman: "...we are more than conquerors...For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It was this conviction that gave Fr Jonathan, a pastor's heart, an ability to journey with others in good times as well as bad. Whether he was serving as Mayor's chaplain, school chaplain or visiting prisons, the sick or the dying. He knew that the power of God's Word, God's presence. God's promise could bring the necessary transformation to any situation. He knew what the first reading proclaimed this morning: "*that grace and mercy await the chosen of the Lord and protection his holy ones.*" So with Fr Jonathan we stand on the authority of these promise in the Word of God and we can confidently pray: "*Lord do it again today, anoint each one present here with this same conviction that nothing can separate us from your love, your grace and mercy is awaiting us and we are ready to receive.*"

As we spoke, in what would turn out to be our final conversation, Fr Jonathan thanked me for making the decision to bring him back to the Abbey and he said: "*It is as if you knew. You let me have the sabbatical at Loppiano, something I had always wanted, it is as if you knew that this was the preparation I needed for what lay ahead, how marvellous God is.*" I told him that I thought it was indeed the plan of God, Loppiano was to be the preparation for the next stage of his life, only after he had finished the sabbatical did he then get the diagnosis that revealed the Father's plan. How marvellous God is! When he rang me in June last year to tell me of the results of medical tests, I found myself in prayer uttering the words from today's Gospel: "*I bless you father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children.*" How wonderful God is.

Fr Jonathan knew, and he knows with greater clarity even more at this moment, that because his trust and love for God's word that his monastic vocation and his encounter with Focolare movement taught him, he knew/knows that God's Word is not a collection of phrases, commas and full stops on paper. Rather this Word is a Word of life – a life giving word of power. When Jesus spoke/speaks things change. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear and the dead are raised. His word becomes flesh in our flesh. In our situations. In our story. That is why Fr Jonathan knows that the greatest sadness is to reduce this Word, this Jesus, to a mere set of ideas and pastoral plans, strategies and programs.

He wanted others to encounter the living Lord. Hence he wanted, as God's Word today has suggested to us, he wanted to be a window through which others could encounter Jesus, the Lord of life. This was the energy that fuelled all his pastoral activity. He wanted the lost, the

hopeless, the anxious and the weary to know that God has a Word that can change everything. It may not change the results of medical tests, and it may not prevent you from facing difficult choices or situations, but it can, as it did for Fr Jonathan give you the perspective to see God present, active and victorious, even, and especially in situations that seem life denying. Why? How?

I recall saying to Fr Jonathan before I left to visit Zimbabwe: “any years ago you chose to follow Jesus, do you know where he’s leading you?” In typical fashion he began a great description of the many people, events experiences that he had had. “Yes”, I said when I could get a word in, “...but do you know where he is leading you?”. “Well, yes, Heaven”, he said. “Yes”, I responded. “He has only one purpose to take you to the Father’s heart, and that is where you’re going”.

This homily, like any homily is not about the preacher, it’s not about Fr Jonathan and the many wonderful attributes that he had. It is about Jesus and his desire to take us to the Father’s heart: ‘Come to me’ said Jesus in today’s Gospel ‘and I will give you rest’. Fr Jonathan, well done, now rest in Him who is close to the Father’s heart and pray for us that we too might stay on course and reach the same destination.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB
Homily at the Requiem Mass of Fr Jonathan Cotton, OSB
Ampleforth Abbey
1 February 2024