

## HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL MASS OF FR ROBERT HOLMES WALKER

MONDAY 12 APRIL 2010

Many will remember, five years ago, the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II in this Easter season. I remember well the many remarks about the blessedness of dying within the Octave of Easter, when the whole Church is taken up with the joy of the Resurrection.

Fr Robert went one better! He died on Easter Sunday, the very day of the Lord's rising from the dead.

Today we pray that he will share fully that Resurrection, through the mercy of God, and so come to that fullness of life in the final restoration of all things in Christ, the great promise of our faith.

Here in Baldock you knew Fr Robert well. He was your Parish Priest from 1984 to 1998 and then acting as a supply priest until 2004. He remained living here in retirement until his death just these few days ago.

You know much of his story, from his upbringing in Wolverhampton, the Anglican priests in his family, his attraction to a Benedictine way of life at Douai. No doubt the presence of our own Benedictine Cardinal, Cardinal Hume, drew him to offer himself as a candidate for the priesthood here in Westminster. He was sent to Allen Hall in 1977 and ordained by Cardinal Hume on 26 April 1980. He served in the Hackney Parish, then in Waltham Cross before coming here, to you, in 1984.

These days of Easter lead us to ponder this mystery of death, the pathway from this life, a pathway about which we know so little yet believe and hope so much.

We know in faith that life is changed not ended. We know that we enter into God's presence, to be received with mercy, where nothing is hidden yet all can be healed, so that we may await the final restoration, the final transformation. In the words of the Book of Revelation, 'See, I am making all things new!'

We know in faith that this pathway is not opened up in the twinkling of an eye, but through the suffering and death of Christ. We know that our Risen Saviour bears the wounds of His sufferings.

All of this helps us to look death in the eye and not be overcome with fear.

And so we pray today for Fr Robert, and for all who miss him and mourn his loss. There are so many of you here today, and many others abroad, who share in this precious prayer.

Yet this Easter mystery also embraces life before death. It invites us to look at the patterns we trace through the years, the events, the tragedies, errors and goodness, the personal qualities and characteristics, that mark our pilgrimage here on earth.

Indeed this reflection is the crux of the readings we have heard.

The Psalm speaks of our journey through the valley of darkness and the courage we gain from the Lord.

The first reading, from the Book of Ecclesiastes, quite directly addresses the spectrum of good and evil, of generosity and greed, of gentleness and anger, of abstinence and indulgence that shape the lives of all of us. It then reminds us that **we** 'cannot comprehend the work of God from beginning to end.'

Indeed only the Lord knows our hearts and our deepest desires. It is only when the grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus meet the Risen Lord that they come to understand the purpose and pattern of the events that have happened.

The underlying message is clear: that God is present deeply within the events of our lives, even the mess we make. Nothing lies beyond his mercy and loving embrace.

We see something of this rich pattern in the ministry of Fr Robert. You know his pastoral care of his people at crucial moments of sickness and joy. You know the remarkable work he did with young people, in those youth weeks and weekends, walking, abseiling and being out and about. They were splendid, formative times for so many. You know, too, that Robert was a man of strong friendships and personal ties. Certainly his friends among the priests will now miss him, although his old holiday companions, Frs. Peter Bourne, Tony Potter and Peter Latham, will we trust be there to welcome him. So, too, will his mother Vera, who many of you will have known during her last years here in Baldock.

This love of friendship is such an important part of life, especially for a priest. So I thank all of you who extended that love to Fr Robert, both when he was your Parish Priest and in the years that followed, with the difficulties they brought for him.

It is this love which gives us a hint of all that we trust for in the Lord. This love helps us to remember the important distinction between love and approval. There may be much in our lives that does not win approval. Yes, we are sinners and there are failings in all of us for which we are ashamed. But approval in the eyes of others, or shame because we have lost their approval, are not the deepest realities for which we strive.

In faith we try to live by love, not approval; to be moved to sorrow and repentance, not simply troubled by shame. And we can do so because the Lord never withdraws his love. He moves us to sorrow for our failings and sins so that he can fill us again with his love.

This is the true heart of the Easter mystery, which the Church tries – and needs – to live at this time. This is the mystery within which we pray for Fr Robert, for the repose of his soul, in thanksgiving for all he did as a priest and as a friend, which we now appreciate afresh.

The love with which we support each other is the nearest we can get to making real the mercy of God. Again, then, I thank so many of you for being alongside Fr Robert.

I thank Fr Denis and the parish for preparing these funeral rites and Robert's fellow priests for coming to them.

As we offer this Sacrifice of the Mass we commend to our loving Father the soul of His priest. It was from the Father that the gift of priesthood was given, a gift that Robert love and that you loved in him; a gift that enabled Robert to offer this same sacrifice for you as we now offer for him, a sacrifice which open for us the Father's love and mercy and the pathway to the fullness of life.

May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Westminster