

FUNERAL MASS OF MONSIGNOR DAVID GEMMELL

ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH

MONDAY 17 MARCH 2008

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

PROLOGUE:

The opening words of St John's Gospel begin as follows:

“In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory”.

We think of those opening statements concerning the greatest event in the history of the world. And now we think of some other statements concerning an event in our own world – the world of the Gemmell Family, the world of the family of the Church in our Archdiocese and country, and the world which had been inhabited by David Gemmell.

And so I begin my words to you by stating:

“On 20th May 1953 David Robert Gemmell was born to David and Josephine Gemmell the third child in a growing loving Catholic family. Life was often hard in mining villages like Oakley where the family grew up – but their faith was strong and their love for one another increased and deepened over the years.”

It was David who felt called to the Priesthood – and throughout his priestly life, like other priests before him including his friend and rector of Gillis College when he was a member of staff, Monsignor Tony McNally, he loved the Emmaus story in the Gospels comparing his own life's journey to the journey of the Disciples on the road to Emmaus.

EMMAUS – THE CALL:

We read in St Luke's Gospel Chapter 24 vs 13 to 17:

“That very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened”.

Yes – David heard the call of God and he was able to talk about that call to various people. First of all of course were his parents Josephine and David and members of his close knit family; and then there was that beloved father figure of a parish priest the late Canon John McNay who was parish priest in Oakley for over thirty years. As he progressed through secondary school, St Columba's initially in Cowdenbeath and then in Dunfermline, I met with David as he was thinking of his future. I did think that he had the makings of a good priest and from time to time did suggest to him the possibility that God might be calling him to the Priesthood.

However I stress he was very much that ordinary young man whom we have all known and loved. On one occasion I mentioned to him that I was going to our annual Lourdes day then in Edinburgh – would he like to come along thinking that he might meet likeminded young men also thinking of the Priesthood. He indicated that he would be delighted to come with me – and then asked if it would be alright if he could bring his girlfriend along! That same girlfriend Marion Kelly by name sent me a letter of sympathy on learning of David's death. I met her and her husband recently in Cathedral House and she reminded me in her letter of how her father who was also a miner's son seemed to just "take" to David. "That laddie is a worker" he said often to me and had great respect for him. When he heard David was going to become a priest he said "that laddie will make a great priest!"

David's thoughts about the Priesthood did indeed deepen. He was accepted for seminary by my predecessor Cardinal Gray and ordained as a priest in his home parish of Oakley on 23rd February 1978.

He chose as the Gospel Reading for his Ordination Mass the Gospel which has just been proclaimed today that Gospel on which I am basing my words – the journey of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It was a representation of the two disciples meeting Jesus in the breaking of the bread that he had on his ordination card at that time – perhaps an indication to us all of how deeply he appreciated that particular Gospel passage.

EMMAUS – THE JOURNEY:

We read in St Luke's Gospel, Chapter 24 vs 18 and 19:

"One of the disciples called Cleopas said to Jesus: You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days". "What things?" Jesus asked. "All about Jesus of Nazareth" they answered. "Who proved he was a great prophet by the things he said and did in the sight of God and of the whole people".

The disciples had Jesus of Nazareth as the focal point of their lives – that Jesus who suffered, died and rose again. David Gemmell also had Jesus as the focal point in his life. He saw it as his responsibility to hand on the love, the care and the compassion of Jesus Christ to all those whom he met. He fulfilled various apostolates within our Archdiocese and further afield. In St Kentigern's and in our Cathedral, Edinburgh as an assistant priest; in Gillis College in Edinburgh and in Scotus College in Glasgow where he had the heavy responsibility of being pastoral tutor and also Vocations Director in our own Archdiocese; and then as administrator in our Cathedral here in Edinburgh following on the resignation through age of Monsignor Grady in 1996. He also accepted responsibility as Administrator of nearby St Ninian's Parish and embraced my Pastoral Plan with regard to the clustering of parishes within the City of Edinburgh.

When preaching here at the Funeral Mass of his friend and mentor, Monsignor Grady some two years ago, David mentioned his first instructions from Monsignor Grady.

"When I first met Pat back in 1978 as a curate along with Dick Holuka in St Kentigern's Parish his opening remark was very clear: "Dick is looking after the Cardinal, you will look after the Parish, and I'm preparing for my eternal demise!"

David did indeed look after the Parish allowing Pat to “prepare for that eternal demise!” And how he did look after St Kentigern’s people for some four years before those four years as an assistant in St Mary’s Cathedral.

David endeared himself to various types of parishioners in a special way. The children in his two primary schools of St Mary’s and St Ninian’s thoroughly enjoyed his visits; while he prepared the pupils in St Thomas of Aquin’s Secondary School for adult life. One of the pupils in our Cathedral school wrote after David’s death that “Father David was needed in Heaven because God wanted a funny Angel!” Young people thinking of marriage found him a source of inspiration. Approximately one third of all the young people preparing for marriage in our City are prepared here in the Cathedral parish. I know of many young couples today who still sought the advice and help of David concerning their marriage and their own teenage families as these children of theirs were seeking their own ways in life. The old, the sick and the housebound were also the recipients of his special love and care as he helped so many of them on their own journey toward God.

David shared something of his love of the Priesthood as pastoral director in Drygrange and Scotus also inspiring members of staff. That example to priests continued in his ongoing pastoral work and especially in his guidance to many as a Vicar General of the Archdiocese.

He had a love for missionary work and with me travelled to El Salvador, Chiapas in Mexico, Guatemala, and only last year in Vietnam and China.

All admired the simple lifestyle which David led and the way in which he endeared himself to everyone by his simple care for them. Our recently appointed Cathedral organist, Simon Nieminski, indicated that when he was under a certain stress recently prior to the opening recital, David appeared as if from nowhere and handed him a gin and tonic with ice and lime! I must say that that same service was also provided to me at various times when David thought I needed that particular medicine.

While here in the Cathedral as Administrator he had a very deep love for his apostolate and especially for those with whom he worked closely. Over the past few years it was Father Hugh Purcell who was his close collaborator in ministry here in the Cathedral. David and Hugh were able to support one another in many and varied different ways – and it was Hugh who accompanied him on that last journey to Barcelona and was with him both shortly before and shortly after he died. I thank Hugh in a special way for all that he managed to accomplish with David especially on that last journey.

David also had special friends in the Priesthood – including his own particular support group and his very many friends particularly latterly in the Cathedral Parish where he was proud to state that there were over 300 of his parishioners involved in one or other of the many apostolates which he shared with them.

No individual was excluded from his love.

Sharing stories with David’s family shortly after his death they realised that his call was to the Lord and to the Lord’s people and they were prepared to share him with everyone. Words which came into my mind when speaking to them in Josephine’s home just after his death were those words about Jesus: “Who is my mother, who are my sisters and brothers?” If one was a friend of David’s then one had to realise that in loving him you shared his love with many thousands of people at home and abroad.

EMMAUS – FINDING JESUS:

In St Luke's Gospel, Chapter 24, from verse 44 we read:

“Then Jesus told them: “This is what I meant when I said while I was still with you that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the prophets and in the psalms has to be fulfilled.....You are witnesses to this.....and now I am sending down to you what the father has promised.....as he blessed them he withdrew from them and was carried up to Heaven!”

The disciples did indeed recognise Jesus in the scriptures and in the breaking of bread.

Right up to the end of his life on earth David was still seeking Jesus and endeavouring to hand that same Jesus on to others.

He was one of our most active and energetic priests – cycling, hill walking, climbing, fishing, football – everything he entered into with great gusto bringing whoever he could along with him so that he could share something of his joy of living with others. It was almost as if he could not do all that he wanted to do in his life!

But he did have to slow down following on various serious health warnings which he received. He had those knee operations from which he did not really fully recover. He developed arrhythmia – which is a rapid and uncontrolled irregular beating of the heart. He had hospital treatment which meant stopping his heartbeat and then restarting it with electrical charges. But he never decreased in the volume of apostolic work which he managed to accomplish.

In his last years of life he accomplished very much of what he had set out to do – to make our Cathedral literally a stage for Jesus Christ at the heart of our City of Edinburgh and at the heart of our Archdiocese. He did not speak only of the Cathedral but of the pastoral centre; he ensured that the magnificent hall complex adjoining the Cathedral was completed to the highest standards; and to bring more people into the Cathedral he opened the Café Camino. He enjoyed the beauty of the liturgy and only a week before he died there was the opening recital on the magnificent new Cathedral organ.

I thank God for the evening of that opening recital when David had his special guests for a reception beforehand; when the Cathedral itself was crowded for the opening recital; and when I had the opportunity in the presence of so very many people of paying him due honour using words which embarrassed him intensely but of which he was simply proud granted that he knew that his mother and all of his family were there to hear my praise of him.

Some of our well remembered and much loved priests have died in unexpected places: The late Father Jock Dalrymple on a golf course; Father Norman Cooper on a mountain in Skye; Father Jimmy Henry rushing from the seminary to celebrate Mass in the secondary school; and David after a football match in Barcelona in a hotel room. (Indeed his beloved brother-in-law, Kenny, Rosemary's husband, died suddenly and tragically on a hillside.)

There is a lesson for us here and that is to continue our own journey as did those disciples on the way to Emmaus. They found Jesus as did David Gemmell in breaking the Word of God and in sharing the Eucharist. But this is the lesson for us – not only to find Jesus within the walls of a church or cathedral but to find him wherever we are with other people – on that golf course, fishing, hill climbing, at a football match, or about our daily tasks whatever they are as a priest or as a lay person.

EPILOGUE:

At the end of the prologue to St John's Gospel we read:

“From his fullness we have, all of us received – yes, grace in return for grace!”

And the last words of St John's Gospel read:

“There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written”.

We all have our own stories to tell about David. I think of the volume of stories sent to me by ordinary mail or email or even recounted by telephone or in person. I admire that fantastic Cathedral website which contains so many beautiful messages of love about David. I think those words of St John can indeed be applied to David and his life – there were indeed many other things that David did; if all were written down the world itself I suppose would not hold all the books that would have to be written. He has written something of the love of Jesus Christ in our lives; he has shared something of that love of Christ especially in Word and Eucharist within the walls of this Cathedral, within this City of Edinburgh and wherever he went.

David concluded his obituary for Monsignor Grady by stating: “For Pat it was not the extinguishing of the light – it was putting out the lamp because his dawn had come”.

The lamp of David's life on earth has been put out. It is now up to each one of us to realise that the life that he lived and handed on to us has not been extinguished – we must carry that same light of the love of Jesus Christ wherever we are continuing that Christ-like apostolate of love which has so moved so many in so many different ways here in our midst.