

Archdiocese of Birmingham

HOMILY

Preached by

**The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Birmingham**

at the

FUNERAL MASS OF BISHOP KEVIN DUNN

Tuesday 11 March 2008

St Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle

Exactly one week ago today, we were celebrating, in Birmingham, the Feast of St Chad. We remembered with gratitude the journey of this saint of the seventh century from the North East to the Midlands. He was formed here on Holy Island in the school of evangelisation headed by St Aidan and he came to the Midlands with great zeal to be a preacher of the faith.

Bishop Kevin Dunn came from the Potteries to the North East. He was formed in the school of faith of Oscott College and the Birmingham presbyterate, of Cotton College, Christleton Hall and, most fundamentally, in the precious school of his family. In his own way he brought to the North East an energy and a zeal for the faith that was the best that we could offer.

Thinking about these two men today it is not difficult to take to heart the wonderful words of the prophet Isaiah that we heard in the first reading:

“The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for the Lord anointed me.
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor
to bind up hearts that are broken;
to proclaim liberty to captives,
freedom to those in prison;
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord,
a day of vengeance for our God.”

It is wonderful to think that over this span of fourteen hundred years, and consistently during it, the Spirit of the Lord has been given, often in full measure, so that this Gospel of peace and forgiveness can be proclaimed.

You and I too receive this Spirit of the Lord. You and I too are called to proclaim this freedom, this favour from the Lord, to bring this good news.

And the prophet Isaiah also tells us that the Spirit of the Lord, which was so alive in Bishop Kevin, will also replace the ashes of our mourning with a garland and with the oil of gladness.

Today we come to pray for the soul of this comparatively young and yet much loved Bishop. I welcome you all, especially the two Cardinals who are present, Cardinal Cormac and Cardinal Keith O'Brien. We are honoured with the presence of the Papal Nuncio representing the Holy Father. I welcome the Vice Lord Lieutenant of Tyne and Wear and the Lord Mayor of the City of Newcastle and other civic leaders. I welcome representatives of Durham University, the five MPs who are present and others in political life. Of course, I also welcome all the priests, deacons, religious and faithful together with all from our fellow Christian churches, and other faiths. Bishop Tom Butler spoke to me the other day about how keenly he, and you, all feel this sad loss. The ashes of our grief are real and bitter indeed. We feel the despondency of which Isaiah speaks. Yet we come in prayer ready to offer to each other consolation and support and intent above all else on commending the Bishop who has died to his merciful Father in heaven.

Again at this moment I can't help thinking back to St Chad. The Venerable Bede tells us that "He administered his diocese in great holiness of life, following the example of the ancient fathers." But Chad did so only for two years. Bede also describes the call Chad issued to his brethren as he lay dying. I am quite sure that Bishop Kevin, after his brief four years in office, would echo this same message. Chad urged his brothers and sisters "in their prayers to recommend my passage to the Lord and to provide for your own, the whereof is uncertain, by watching, prayer and good works."

Chad, of course, was a family man. He was one of five brothers, all dedicated to the faith and to its proclamation. So too was Kevin. He was one of a large family which was so firmly rooted in the faith and consistently gave him great support. One of the memories I shall treasure is of the Dunn family occupying virtually all the pavement tables outside their hotel in Lourdes on the great pilgrimages in which he took part.

This family was proud of their Kev. His young nephew Mark, on the morning that Kevin's appointment as a Bishop was to be made public, sat in his class watching the clock. When it arrived at 11am he promptly put up his hand and said "Miss my uncle's going to be a Bishop". Miss didn't believe him and had to send for Kevin's sister, Mary, who also taught in the school. There was much rejoicing.

Indeed the rejoicing was so great that it spilled onto the street and a red carpet was put down on the pavement to welcome the new Bishop to his family home. Our prayers today are so obviously for his mother, Catherine, and all this wonderful family.

But Kevin was a family man in the wider sense too. He had a marvellous ability to put people at their ease, to create around him a sense of belonging, a family sense, which was so precious. He did so in the West Indian Chaplaincy and as a parish priest in the Birmingham diocese he did just this. He did it with his engaging and forthright manner and with his readiness to tease. One young priest complained that the presbytery was cold. "Put on an extra jumper", his parish priest, Kevin Dunn, told him, with that grin with which you knew there was to be no arguing!

Among the Religious sisters and brothers he generated a fresh sense of belonging, one to another, as he fulfilled the role of Episcopal Vicar with sensitivity and shrewdness. In the Pastoral Area for which he has responsibility in Birmingham diocese he showed that same warmth, openness and pastoral zeal. Of course you know only too well that when he came to the North East he quickly became part of this family. Of course he had to adapt. Here he needed those extra jumpers himself. But you took him to your hearts and he did the same.

Fr Seamus Cunningham has spoken to me of how much Bishop Kevin was esteemed among you. He highlighted his good humour, his openness, his readiness to trust and to receive trust, his desire for honest conversation and no hiding. Seamus tells me of how much he achieved, which you all know, and how much he gave support and love to his priests even in the most difficult circumstances.

Kevin quickly became part of the great spiritual family of the North East too. He would always talk, in these last years, of Aidan, Cuthbert and Bede. His passion for the potential of the little church on Holy Island led him to mount the campaign to have it restored and enlarged. His commitment to raising funds for the Bede Chair of Catholic Theology at Durham University also tapped into that long and distinguished tradition of Catholic scholarship here in the North East. As that project comes to fulfilment it will be a lasting tribute to Kevin and I am delighted to learn of the proposal, by the University, to hold an annual Bishop Dunn Memorial Lecture on 25 May, the Feast of St Bede and the day of his episcopal ordination.

He was, in the very best sense, father to this diocese even though his time here has been short. A canon lawyer by training, yet he had such a big pastoral heart. When speaking about Canon Law or teaching it he always insisted on reference to the last canon, canon 1752, which states quite clearly "that the salvation of souls in the Church must always be the supreme law". Those who learnt their Canon Law elsewhere often remarked "Oh Kev, we never got that far in our course!" But this was his guiding light, his overriding concern: the salvation of souls, the care of the people in their journey to God.

As we gather we know we have to thank God for all the remarkable gifts and graces that he worked through this man. Yet at the same time we ask the question: what will happen to his work? What will happen to us?

He held out so much hope for our future and now he is gone. We have lost him when we were just beginning to appreciate all that he could do for us. At this moment we must be attentive again to the words of St Paul to his Letter to the Romans. He drums into us that "With God on our side nothing can be against us". He tells us that "Even when we are troubled or worried, being threatened or even attacked" nothing can come between the love of Christ and ourselves. We can almost hear him banging the table when he says "I am certain of this that neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power or height or depth or creative thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord." That is the source of our muted confidence today and of the hope to which we cling. The Lord will not abandon us and he will provide, in his own way, so that if we are faithful he will most certainly draw us closer to himself.

But what of Bishop Kevin? What do we pray for him this day?

I cannot help but think of the scene at his bedside as those last hours passed by. The Freeman Hospital staff gave him such remarkable and dedicated care, for which we truly thank them. But the end did come. His family were there, with his mum, gathered at the bedside. There too was Mrs Pam Hyland, who with utterly discreet and faithful love looked after him for many years and kept constant vigil beside him. This is surely so much an echo of the family scene that lies behind the account of the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel of St John. Mary and Martha, the family circle, are there in great sadness and distress. Indeed we read that Martha “threw herself at the feet of the Lord.” We also read that “at the sight of her tears and of those who followed her” Jesus was moved to tears himself. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is an act of great love, performed in response to the deep compassion that fills the heart of our Saviour.

But it is also an act of profound revelation. Indeed Jesus tells us so when he says “I speak for the sake of those who stand around me, so that they may believe it was you who sent me.” So the act of raising Lazarus from the dead is to call us to a more profound faith, to enable us to see that the raising of Lazarus from physical death and his return to physical life is but a symbol of a much greater rising from the dead to a new and eternal life.

Now, as I return to Kevin’s bedside, I can see the various lines and tubes and machines attached his body that kept him alive during the last weeks of his battle against illness. With that in mind I hear again the words of the Gospel “Jesus said to them: ‘Unbind him, let him go free’.”

And that is what we pray. We pray that he is now enjoying the freedom of the Sons of God. We pray that his grin will add to the light of heaven and that, along with his eminent and holy predecessors he will, with great joy, be keeping an eye on us all.

Only in time will the gift of God’s Holy Spirit turn the ashes of our mourning into a garland of gladness. Yet this is the firm promise, the one to which we cling today as we pray with great sincerity: Eternal rest grant to him O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen.

✠Vincent Nichols
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