

FUNERAL MASS HOMILY - PREACHED BY FR JAMES SWEENEY CP

First of all, let me say it's a privilege to be with you as we remember Fr Justinian, and rejoice over his long life and dedicated service, and as we pray for him now on his final journey into the fullness of life with God.

Justinian was very special to all of us. To his family, of course – the far-flung McGread clan. To his Passionist brothers, among whom he lived for over 70 years. Special too, to priests of the diocese with whom he shared in ministry. Special to the parishioners of St Mungo's, and the others who come to this church. And of course, special to his many friends, who were loyally devoted to him, and in return knew the warmth of his friendship.

For me personally, celebrating his funeral Mass is something of a filial duty. I first met Jus when I went to the novitiate in 1961, and he was the vice-master of novices. It was Jus who helped me, held me, through my first crisis as a Passionist, within days of entering the novitiate. I had a devastating bout of homesickness. Without Jus staying close to me in those early days, I might very well just have run back home!

Jus was good with vulnerable people. He was blessed with empathy – or maybe that should be 'cursed'. Because it's usually those who carry vulnerabilities themselves who are best at sympathising with others. Jus, as I'm sure you found, was a strong personality, robust in his views, clear about what should be done. And yet, he could be quite vulnerable, not quite believing in himself. I remember a school retreat we gave together in St Joseph's College Dumfries. Jus was very diffident about his aptitude for this kind of thing, talking to a class of questioning teenagers – surprising, because he was so good with them one-to-one. In one session we were discussing St Paul among the Corinthians, and his comment that he'd come among them 'in fear and trembling'. Jus latched on to it: 'that's exactly how I've felt coming here. I've been scared ...' And I'll refrain from reporting the next word which graphically described his unease!

Vulnerability, of course, readily becomes invitation. It's what allowed many people to feel so much at ease with Jus. But it's a challenge to live with. We're inclined to hide our vulnerability. Jesus himself, so it seems, could fall prey to his own vulnerability. St John's Gospel today portrays him facing the final challenge of his Passion, and admitting: 'My soul is troubled'. And then the searing question: 'What shall I say ... what can I say?' What to ask of the Father: to 'save me from this hour'? But no! Jesus grasps the moment. He embraces his Passion and death: 'it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour. (So) Father, glorify your name!'

By embracing death, Jesus undermines its power – so we believe in faith. Ultimately, he destroys death itself. As we heard Isaiah prophecy:

On this mountain, the Lord destroys the veil which used to veil all peoples, the pall enveloping all nations; he has destroyed death for ever. The Lord has wiped away the tears from every cheek; he has taken his people's shame away everywhere on earth, for the Lord has spoken.

When Fr Justinian passed away on 2nd February, his life wasn't so much over, as complete. He was prepared, ready to go, as he told me himself a few weeks earlier. This was his life's final step, the final act of his life. He undertook it in union with the Lord to whom he'd given over his life from his early years.

Justinian was born on 8th April 1931. His journey into the life of God started some days later, with his baptism when he was named John. He was one of a family of eleven children, three still living - Jim, Gerry and Joey in America. The family had roots in Co Tyrone, but settled in Scotland; variously, in Ayrshire - where they ran a popular small hotel in Girvan - and in Glasgow. In both places - Ireland and Scotland - the family had contact with the Passionists - at the Graan monastery near Enniskillen, and the Passionist student house and retreat house at Dankeith and Coodham, in Ayrshire.

John sensed a call to priesthood and religious life early on. He completed his schooling at the Passionist juniorate, then at Wheatfield in Belfast. In 1951 he entered the novitiate at the Graan, and took the religious name of Justinian. He made his first profession of vows the following year, on 8th April 1952. He then followed the standard course of studies preparing for ordination: first, philosophy in Dankeith, and then theology in Mount Argus in Dublin. He was one of a large class of six (big by Passionist standards) who were ordained together with two from other orders on 21st December 1957.

Jus's first assignment as a priest, as already mentioned, was assistant to the novice master in the Graan. Part of the role of vice-master is to provide the master with some relief from the novices, and the novices with some relief from the master! Jus was brilliant at it, much appreciated by all of us who were his novices; although it seems he and the master didn't always see eye to eye.

In 1962, Jus returned to Scotland, to undertake the traditional Passionist apostolate for which he'd been prepared. He had various assignments - chaplain to Glasgow Royal Infirmary, guest master at the retreat house in Coodham, parish work and giving parish missions - the standard fare of ministry for a Passionist.

But these were the years when the calm ordered life of the Church and religious life began to shift gear. The Second Vatican Council introduced new perspectives, opened some long-closed windows. It sought to refresh the Church's proclamation of the Gospel, and reach out to the people of changing times.

Jus was an enthusiast for all this. In Coodham, as in other places, he was part of the team pioneering new ways of giving retreats. In community life he welcomed the more relaxed, less formal style of living, relying more on relationships than on structure.

However, fresh ways make new demands. And as I've said, Jus could harbour doubts about himself and what he was able for. He often expressed frustration about the limitations of his formation and training. Not only did he see it as poor in itself, but it was out of date very quickly, once the Council launched the Church on the project of renewal.

But Jus wasn't one to give up! Two ventures influenced him greatly and left their mark. One was the time he spent with the Frontier mission in British Columbia. This lifted him out of the settled ways of the church and religious life that he'd grown up with. It was invigorating. The other venture was a year-long residential programme on dynamic leadership in Chicago. This got him working on himself, getting to the roots of his own personal difficulties. It gave him a grasp of the dynamics that work out in personal relationships and community living.

These insights and skills Jus now brought into his ministry. He returned to his earlier work in formation, now as master of novices himself, and as director of postulants. He served as community superior, and in parishes – at various times in our English-speaking parish in Paris, and in Prestonpans, and here in St Mungo's.

In all of it, the heart of what Jus believed and wanted to communicate was what St John tells us:

'You must see what great love the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children -- which is what we are!'

We are created in love, held in love, and destined for love - a love that transcends all transactional give-and-take, the love that is God's own name, the love that has its most overwhelming expression in the Passion and Death of Jesus – as our founder St Paul of the Cross would often say.

This is what Jus believed - and deeply. He lived it out as well as he could in all the circles of his life – with his friends, with his family, with his community, with the people who came to him for help – all of whom meant so much to him. But more than that, this love is what Jus experienced in his own soul - in the intimacy of a deep prayerful personal relationship with Jesus.

Justinian's conviction about love meant that he was always hoping for more, expecting things to get better. That friendships would flourish, that community life would be richer, that faith would deepen, that the Church would embrace renewal.

Love is of course – and has to be – a bit naïve. And Jus could be naïve in his expectations, unrealistic, maybe over-demanding - wanting heaven now!

'We are already God's children', St John tells us. But also: 'what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed'. While through faith we live in love, love's full expression is not yet, it lies in the future.

Isaiah paints the picture of that promised future:

On this mountain the Lord is preparing a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of succulent food, of well-strained wines.

It's an image that surely appealed to Jus - a man who loved to meet for meals with friends, and loved preparing succulent food himself.

May Jus now finally take his place at the heavenly banquet that's long been prepared for him. So we pray. Amen