PETERS FUNERAL

It is wonderful that Peter should be honoured and remembered in this Civic Service. He was a remarkable and successful local politician and community leader. That’s because he was a remarkable human being – greatly respected and greatly loved – a wonderful husband and father. Peter’s death is above all a time of deep personal loss for Lynn and for Jen and Gilly whom he loved so dearly. We hold them today in our hearts. This moment brings back for me the loss of Peter’s only sister, Gillian, in early adult life. I have no doubt that that experience deepened Peter’s compassion and heightened his awareness that life is a gift to be used well.

Peter and I met in 1970 when we were second year students in Trinity College, Dublin. We shared a flat in Hatch Street, Dublin. Yes of course there was a maternity unit on the ground floor in Hatch Street. And then we shared College rooms together on the university campus. Peter was subsequently my best man – and we maintained a warm friendship over the years. Our student days were like most people’s – hectic and harmless yet full of things that you mightn’t choose to tell your Mum about.

When Peter began to be very ill, Lynn took me into the city centre to see projects which had given him particular pleasure. We looked at the Market Hall and we talked about the cycle routes and the problems over the bus station. And I’ve been reading about the so-called Preston Plan. Our conversation had a feeling of Sir Christopher Wren’s comment, ‘If you seek my memorial, look around.’ These were the things which meant most to Peter. But they were not his alone. The generosity of the tributes to him from every part of the political life of this city is testimony to his willingness to work with all for good of this community which he loved.

So what made him the way he was?

On 2nd February 1972, Peter and I were both on the cusp of adulthood. We stood in Merrion Square in Dublin and watched the British Embassy burning – an event which followed Bloody Sunday in Londonderry. We had grown up in the sectarianism bitterness of Northern Ireland – a society which could not face the truth about itself – devastatingly summed up again by the Irish poet and Nobel Prizewinner Seamus Heaney in the words, ‘Whatever you say, say nothing.’ If we had had the maturity of years, we would have realised that Peter who became the skilful politician was looking at what can happen when politics fails people – and I who became a Church leader was looking at the failure of churches to act as healers and reconcilers. Each of us have spent our lives waiting for the Seamus Heaney moment when the great tide of justice rises up and ‘hope and history rhyme’. Those words were often quoted around the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement - particularly by President Bill Clinton.

Peter didn’t do religion but he never lost his faith in humanity. He came from a conventional religious background. His mother like my parents was of Southern Irish stock. His father John, a truly delightful man, was principal of a small rural Primary School, a Presbyterian elder, a pillar of the Masonic Order. But there was a dark side to that upright God-fearing respectability. Peter knew that religion which gets mixed up with political identity creates sectarianism and that sectarianism costs lives. He knew about political leadership which isn’t cooperative and always says no. And that it is easier to start violence than to finish it.

I think think that background motivated him to practice a different kind of politics and community leadership. He was driven by passionate socialist principle but he was collaborative, creative and generous. Some have spoken of his commitment to his adopted city here in Preston. That is true - but the converse is also true -that it was Preston which gave him the chance of becoming a much bigger person than Northern Ireland would ever have allowed him to be.

The irony that the old friend who turns up today to remember Peter should be a bishop will not have been lost on you. But then one of the parts of his service to the Council in which he took greatest pride and pleasure was the Chairing of the Inter-faith Council. Peter didn’t do religion but I think he understood the significance and the potential of spirituality – an idea neatly summed up by Scottish poet, John Glenday, in an epitaph which ended ‘he couldn’t sing the words so he spoke the tune’. I once attended a meeting of Community Workers in Belfast addressed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. ‘It’s all about spirituality’ he told them and they wrote it down as if it was gospel. Peter too would have understood instinctively – that all human progress depends on the deep inner qualities of people – on resourcefulness, resilience, humour, generosity and sacrifice – on whether people can transcend their hurts, their fears, their background. So that something new can be born. At the end of his poem, Seamus Heaney was playing with the same ideas:

‘That means someone is hearing

The outcry and the birth-cry

Of new life at its term.”

Out of all human striving – out of loss, pain and death – comes the possibility of new life – when the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme.

25 June 2018

Sermon preached by

Rt Revd David Chillingworth