

FIRST ANNIVERSARY MASS OF MONSIGNOR DAVID GEMMELL

ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL EDINBURGH

THURSDAY 5TH MARCH 2009

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege welcoming so many of you back to our Cathedral this evening for this Mass offered for the happy repose of the soul of David Gemmell – just one year after he died so suddenly and tragically in Barcelona.

A particular welcome is extended of course to his mother Josephine and all of the family gathered here so faithfully again. Friends from near and far have returned to our Cathedral to join us in prayer asking God to reward his faithful servant with eternal rest.

At significant moments in David's life he himself turned to the Emmaus story in St Luke's Gospel – he chose this reading for the Mass at which he was ordained to the Priesthood in his home parish of Holy Name Oakley in Fife in 1978; it was the Gospel read at the silver jubilee of his ordination to the Priesthood which was celebrated here in our Cathedral in 2003; and it was the Gospel of his Funeral Mass celebrated here on Monday 17th March 2008.

Consequently I again turn not only to the words of that Gospel but to the phrases which I singled out in that Gospel as being applicable to David one year ago as we were commending him to the loving mercy of our Father.

Now I use those same verses from the Emmaus story – but instead of applying them to David I apply them to each and every one of us on our own life's journey.

EMMAUS – THE CALL:

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

“That very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, 7 miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened”.

St Luke tells us that after the death and burial of Jesus he was laid in an empty tomb; the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus were following behind and took note of the tomb and the position of the body; and then on the first day of the week, at the first sign of dawn, they went to the tomb with the spices they had prepared to anoint the body.

However the tomb was empty and two men in brilliant clothes appeared to them and said to them: “While look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here; he has risen”!

Following on that the women told their story to the eleven apostles who came to the tomb and realising it was empty went back home again amazed at what was happening. Then on that same day those two disciples on their way to Emmaus were talking together about all that had happened!

Over the past twelve months those words I am sure represent something of what we have been doing in our own lives. We have been talking together about David and his life; we have continued to share with one another something of his tremendous influence on us and so very many others; emails, letters and cards have continued to be sent to David's mother, Josephine, the family and myself; and all of the cards and letters which were sent to me have been carefully handed over to Josephine and her family and meticulously and lovingly placed in two large folders.

And over that time perhaps the realisation of what the two men who appeared to the women said can be applied to ourselves: "Why look among the dead for someone who is alive; he is not here; he has risen".

As those disciples on the road to Emmaus continued with their talking their faith grew stronger and they realised that Jesus in the flesh was no longer with them. Hopefully some of that realisation has come to us – there is no point for looking for David among the dead as he is alive; he is not here; he has risen!

Like all of those who have gone before God has called David to himself and slowly, gradually and painfully we must be prepared to release his body from our care and protection and gradually give him over to the Lord who created him.

It is as we continue along our journey that we learn more about what we should be doing.

EMMAUS – THE JOURNEY:

We read in St Luke's Gospel, Chapter 24 Verses 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".

Realisation of the importance of Jesus of Nazareth was something of which those two disciples on the way to Emmaus were fully aware. They had Jesus of Nazareth as the focal point of their lives – that Jesus who suffered, died and rose again.

On the occasion of his death we gradually realised that David too had Jesus as the focal point of 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.

As we continue on our journey of faith during our lives on earth the realisation that Jesus Christ must be the centre of our lives comes before us.

No matter how good, how loving, how friendly a person on this earth may be – his friendship with us, his direction of us, his relationship with us is of no use at all and rather the opposite if it does not direct us toward Jesus of Nazareth rather than to the person himself.

The disciples on the way to Emmaus spoke to Jesus who had appeared to them about all the things that had been happening in Jerusalem over the past few days just as we have been speaking of all the things that had happened in the life of David Gemmell not only in his early life but in his school and seminary life as well as most importantly in his priestly life in parishes of our Archdiocese; in his responsibility of formation of students for the priesthood in two seminaries; in his visits to less fortunate people overseas, especially in El Salvador, Chiapas, Guatemala and China; in sharing the lives and the love of less able people in L'Arche Communities, especially with Jean Vanier himself; and then, of course, latterly here in our Cathedral Parish at the heart of the City of Edinburgh. It was here that he opened up our Cathedral to so very many people, especially with the help of the building programme which included our new Cathedral organ, Café Camino, and the much enlarged Cathedral Hall Complex adjacent to our Cathedral itself.

However, I am sure that David himself would say that his life was fruitless unless we ourselves are now focusing not on David and on all that he did but rather on Jesus of Nazareth and all that he did.

It was to lead people to God in Jesus but David became a Priest; it was because he himself had met Jesus that he wanted to point him out to others and hand them over to that same Jesus.

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 witness to this....and now I am sending to you what the Father has promised...as he blessed them he withdrew from them and was carried up to Heaven!”

David did meet Jesus on his own Emmaus journey through life – he met him as did those first disciples – in the Scriptures and in the breaking of bread.

And how he loved his meetings with Jesus in those two ways.

His priestly life was based on the **teaching of Jesus Christ in Sacred Scripture**. Sometimes he would remark to me personally – “I wish you would concentrate more in your sermons on the teaching of Jesus rather than on the teaching of the Popes down through the centuries no matter how good that is!” And of course he was true in what he had said – the source of all our Christian lives and of all our Christian teaching must be Jesus himself and his love and his teaching as found in the Sacred Scriptures.

And as well as loving and meeting Jesus in Scriptures he also met him in the **breaking of bread**, in the Mass which he celebrated so faithfully day by day in the parishes in which he was serving or in the many places to which he travelled. Like many of you I can remember David celebrating Mass in places which were not really the norm; regularly in the sitting room in his own home with his mother and some of his family around him on his days off; with someone like myself on hilltops or valleys, beside rivers or streams, in simple wooden shacks or in great Cathedrals at home or abroad sharing the Word of God and the Eucharist with a small congregation or considerable hundreds of people.

And of course so many of you will remember those celebrations in parishes and here in our Cathedral when David explained the Scriptures and broke the bread for the people who had been entrusted to his care, especially to the young who loved him so much.

Again the example is provided for us that it is **now our responsibility to continue our Emmaus journey** in union with the Jesus of Nazareth who has been pointed out to us. We ourselves must endeavour to give more of our time day by day to **reading the Word of God in Sacred Scripture** and to learn from the teachings of Jesus just how to live our lives and how to hand on that same of Jesus to others. We ourselves must appreciate more and more the meetings with Jesus which we have in the **Eucharist** and realise that when we receive Jesus in the Eucharist we have that ongoing responsibility to share his teaching and especially his love with others. When the priest says the words “this is my body” over the bread to be consecrated it is so easy to think of these words being said over the whole body of the faithful gathered around the priest – it is the body of Christ in the congregation which is being built up by the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

CONCLUSION:

I concluded my words at David’s Funeral Mass with those last words of St John’s Gospel which 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”.

Thinking over the Emmaus story we have thought of that application to ourselves: Our talk together; our journey in Scripture and in the Mass leading us to realise that our lives are all about Jesus of Nazareth and not about any one individual; and in our finding of Jesus we have that responsibility of handing him on to others.

If St John could say there were many other things that Jesus did, so also with David in his own life of following Jesus both as a layman and as a priest.

The lesson of his life must I believe be that for us, Jesus of Nazareth is the one who must continue to be important in our lives and on our life’s journey as it was for David and on his journey through life.

The example of the life of Jesus must be one that shines through our lives as it shone through the life of David during our Mass today as previously we have heard those beautiful words from the prophet Micah:

“This is what the Lord asks of you: only this – to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God!”.

Strengthened by our time together may we continue to go forward having the inspiration of David Gemmell before us and realise that as Christ has called him to himself so we have now that added responsibility of continuing on our journey of finding day by day that Son of God Jesus Christ who still lives with us on earth in others.