



Homily at Fr Brooks Patterson's Funeral
4 May 2005

Fr Brooks Patterson's Funeral

I knew Brooks Patterson when we were students together in the seminary in Brisbane preparing for our ordination to the priesthood. He was older than I was but commenced his studies later than I did because he had already undertaken an apprenticeship in pharmacy and had worked for a drug company as well. Still, I had a lot to do with him as we all did, because of the enclosed nature of the seminary in those days.

My contact with him ceased by and large after my own ordination in 1969 until I returned to the diocese of Townsville as bishop, just over four years ago. He was then parish priest of Proserpine. Before that he had worked in Ingham, Winton, Hughenden, Mt Isa and Ayr. Later he moved to Charters Towers and then he came to live at the Bishop's House while he worked in the parish of Blessed Mary MacKillop, Mundingburra.

After his second-last major period of hospitalisation he moved to Railway Estate where his good friend, Fr Glenn Humphreys, looked after him so very well. He told me a number of times before he died how much he appreciated Glenn's care, and Glenn himself, as a priest working in our diocese. He was very concerned that I recognise this and I gladly do so today.

It was very sad to see Brooks' lungs and heart slowly deteriorate and reduce his capacity to do all the things he longed to do, to touch people's lives, to preach, above all to celebrate the liturgy which he loved with a passion. He was constantly on the phone and receiving visitors because his life was full of so many friends whom he had grown to love through his pastoral ministry. This was one of his exceptional gifts. His pastoral relationships became life-long friendships. Your presence here today bears witness to that.

I visited him nearly every day each time he was in hospital and saw him struggling to deal with infections in his lungs and a growing weakness in his body. The cries of the author of Lamentations would, I am sure, have found an echo in his heart on many occasions. My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. The thought of my affliction and my homelessness ... my soul constantly thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

At the same time, this increasing diminishment did not ultimately crush him, because there was a counter-force within. In some notes he left me, he called this force simply God. This counter-force was also described in Lamentations and it found an even stronger echo in his heart. But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in Him.

He seemed to have died simply from exhaustion. His body could not any longer keep going. If ever you have lived with, or worked closely with Brooks, you perhaps have felt a similar exhaustion at times. He really only had two gears, so to speak, first and fifth. There was very little in between. The energy he put into anything he did was so total and all consuming that at times it was like living and working with a whirlwind. His attitudes and passions and hopes and concerns were all so strong and so intense that "moderation", or "mediocre", were not in his vocabulary. He cared deeply about everything and often expressed his deep concern so strongly that he could shock his listeners. He was a great communicator because he cared desperately about what he wanted to share, and he cared deeply about the people with whom he wanted to share it.

It soon became apparent that his last trip to hospital was to be his final one. He began to prepare for his approaching death. He had acknowledged for some time rather obliquely, and then increasingly directly, that he would soon be leaving this life. But for him it wasn't just leaving this life which was a cause for "lamentation". He was going somewhere else and he knew deep within his heart, and at times expressed his faith about where he was going. As the author of the letter of the Hebrews said: "Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart, in the full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised us is faithful".

He began to write down some personal reflections during his last stay in hospital. He told me about them and became a little shy about what he hoped we might do with them after he died. But he very much wanted me to know that they were there. It was a privilege for me to be able to read them. I realised on doing so that he was sustained by his prayer which became an hour each day listening to God once he retired, and by his personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Whatever he was going through was interpreted by him in terms of that relationship. As St John quoted Jesus in today's Gospel: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also. And whoever serves me, the Father will honour." Brooks was a servant of Jesus and he walked with him in his mission and ministry and then in his suffering. Finally he was with him in his dying so that he might be one with him in his resurrection.

I would like to share with you his own words from two little passages entitled: "On Living", and "On Dying", which were in the notes he left me. You will hear his voice and you will recognise his attitudes, but you will also hear his heart, his spirit, and know that he indeed followed the great high priest through the curtain, along the way to where he always knew he wanted to go.

ON LIVING

"You and I have met some wonderful human beings, and, I guess, a reasonable share of others. However, it is my experience that most people want to do the right thing. For all their idealistic rebellion, the large majority of our young people come through as sensitive, competent and accountable people. I enjoy life, rejoicing in seeing others enjoy it. Mostly I try to be positive and optimistic about each one's capacity to achieve some happiness. Then I ask myself how else could I be when I am a disciple of Christ who saw the crowd and felt pity for them.

Life can dish out hard yards for some people. They need our special love and support. Yet the human capacity for burden is like bamboo - far more flexible than you would believe at first glance. Interestingly it were people like the above who were attracted to the late Pope John Paul II. In the holiness and outreach of the late Pope people saw the flickering candle of hope - the light of Christ. Whatever of some people's personal views about the late Holy Father, he stood as a rock of refuge for those buffeted by the storms and tempests of life. To me the reason was simple. People saw the late Pope as a man of prayer, certain of his belief in and relationship with Jesus Christ. He was also blessed by a devotion to the Virgin Mary, a devotion we all need to rediscover.

... I think that what saved me over the years was my devotion to the Eucharist. Each day I looked forward to celebrating the Eucharist, and I made every effort to pray it and not just say it.

So I began to spend some prime time with God. The results have been beyond my dreams. Now that I am retired I find myself spending an hour or more quietly listening to God.

My health signs tell me of some hard times to come. Somehow I believe that I need to be at ease with God and spend time with him now, as he will be with me in my time of greatest need. Please don't think I am making pacts or agreements. I know I can sense God's presence and love, and I give thanks and praise. In the words of the Magnificat I can sing with Mary. 'My soul rejoices in the God my Saviour for he has done great things for me, and holy is his name'."

ON DYING

"Like us all, I have been at many a death bed scene. To me this has always been a privilege as I experience the leaving of a soul on its journey home to God.

Sadly, also, we have been at the needless loss of young lives - on our roads, in suicide and in drug overdose. On these occasions we are left to commit them humbly into God's care as we support their loved ones.

Whatever of the occasion or the circumstance, a death is a death. A human life has completed its earthly journey. The elderly leave a legacy while the young bequeath unfulfilled hopes and dreams. Yet each life has stamped its mark on our world and touched the fabric of at least one person along the journey. Every life is unique, precious, and cherished by someone else.

us Christians each life is sacred – a dream of God’s love.

The journey to our earthly end is a hazardous one that defies reason and sets ever-changing parameters as hopes and dreams mutate. All humans have their share of good and bad times, their achievements and disappointments. It is in how we handle the various situations that will determine who and what we are.”

Psalm 126 (127) comes to mind:

‘If the Lord does not build this house in vain do its builders labour?

If the Lord does not watch over the city in vain does the watchman keep vigil?’ ”

Brooks’ life stamped its mark on our world and touched the fabric of many people along the journey. He handled the various situations he had to deal with in different ways; the good and bad times, his achievements and disappointments. These, as he said, determined who he was. But how he handled his sickness and his dying determined that he was a man and a priest we were all blessed to have known.

Brooks will be missed by so many, by his sisters Joy and Louise and their husbands Victor and Eric, by his cousins who have travelled so far to be here, by priests who worked with him and by all those whom he served who became his friends.

We pray for them. We pray for him.

May Brooks rest in peace.