



Homily at Fr Hay's
Funeral
24 May 2004

Funeral—Fr Kevin Joseph (John) Hay

The Bible, especially the New Testament, can be read as a book about a million meals. All the way through we read of people eating together.

This is not surprising because social life for human beings revolves around meals. Though may be we are in danger of losing our tradition of the family meal here in Australia, we at least hold on to it for special occasions.

Meals are a special way of showing hospitality. If people join us for a meal our friendship is sealed. The same, extraordinarily, was true for God.

Jesus shared meals with those whom he wished to save, sinners and outcasts, and he was condemned for doing it because He broke all the rules of his society and religion by doing so.

He also described what lay ahead for his followers in the next life in terms of a great banquet in which God or he himself would be the host. We sang about this banquet or feast in the opening hymn of our Vigil last night.

By using this image, Jesus was expanding on a theme already found in the prophets such as Isaiah, whom we listened to in our first reading:

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken."

The Eucharist which John Hay celebrated so faithfully and lovingly each day of his priestly life is a foretaste of this heavenly banquet. We already eat the bread of heaven when we share in it in the Eucharist.

In one sense we could be said to be already in heaven (on the mountain with the great feast before us) every time we enter into the eucharist because Jesus Christ who returned to the Father and so to heaven, in yesterday's liturgy of Ascension, is our host in the eucharist. He shares his risen, glorious, or heavenly life with us.

I joined John on a number of days each week to celebrate Eucharist with him in the Villa Chapel. It saddened me one day when he couldn't make it to hear him say "this was the first time I didn't make it for mass".

Through the Eucharist he entered heaven just a little more each day so that he was very ready, I am sure, when he was invited by his host, Jesus himself, to come to this heavenly meal for the final and definitive time and in its definitive and perfect form.

When Jesus preached to his disciples on the side of the mountain, he promised them that their "reward would be great in heaven", a heavenly banquet in other words, and they could "rejoice and be glad" as they waited for it if they were truly his followers.

John Hay "rejoiced and was glad" despite his suffering at different times in his life and his anxiety at other times when he felt uncertain about his capacity to handle a task which confronted him. He always had a little joke or funny saying as his comment on any situation, which was a sure sign of this deep gladness which comes only from a profound relationship with Christ; even if, as many commented last night in the Vigil, his jokes were sometimes maybe a little corny.

John delighted in telling me about a friend who rang him to congratulate him on his silver jubilee when John already knew he had cancer. The friend was older than him and not well. When John asked how he was, he replied in rather depressing tones which John imitated for me: "John, I am dying".

John laughed when he told me he replied: "Well join the club!"

Why could he "rejoice and be glad in this way" as he faced the difficulties of life, even death itself?

Let's hear again the categories Jesus himself named as "blessed" and so able to rejoice and be glad in this life:

"the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers".

Surely these are a description of John Hay. Someone said to me the day he died, quite simply: "He was a humble man." They said it with admiration. Last night the word was used by three or four speakers. It seems to be the best word we can find to describe him.

The last time I spoke to him, a few hours before he died, he had revived for a little while and when he saw me there he said "have you been here all day?". When I replied that I pretty much had but that now I needed to go, he said "thank you" and "I'll see you later". I then blessed him and he responded with a very strong "Amen".

This short exchange of words is typical of John. He was matter-of-fact and down-to-earth even as death drew near. His words show an immediate, automatic interest in the other person and a desire never to cause anyone any trouble on his account. Other people mattered to him more than himself. And then there was God. His strong "Amen", the last clear word I heard from him summed up his life. "Amen" he said to God whom he knew was blessing him no matter what.

John was a "humble" man who found his place in our lives as friend and brother, servant and inspiration, because other people and God were always more important to him than anything else. That is why "generous", "kind", "friendly", "caring" were also words used of him last night.

I loved having him near and just liked to be with him. When I broke the bread of the eucharist at the first mass after he died and realized I needed one fewer piece, I became very deeply aware not only of how much I and all of us will miss him, but how he is now no longer in need of the eucharist because he is finally banqueting at the eternal feast of heaven.

Now, instead of praying with him in the eucharist, I have started to ask him to pray for me and for us in heaven.

Thank you John. May God bless you eternally, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God surely rejoices now in your eternal "Amen".