

Catherine Phelan RIP
Funeral Mass
Tuesday 19th January 2021

Catherine Phelan (nee Purcell), Glosa, Rathdowney, Co. Laois. January 16th 2021. Sadly mourned by her loving husband Tom and her family Dermot, Donal and Bernadette, her brother Pat and her sister Marian, sister in law, brother in law, nephews, nieces, relatives and her many friends.

Homily

Tomorrow Joe Biden will officially become the President of The United States. He is only the second Catholic to hold that office. Exactly sixty years ago tomorrow The first Catholic president was inaugurated. That of course was John F. Kennedy.

Some time ago I received a gift of a beautiful book of poetry edited by President John F. Kennedy's only daughter, Caroline. Introducing a section of poems about motherhood, Caroline writes the following: *"But I can certainly say, like everyone does, that becoming a mother is the best thing that ever happened to me. Having a child defines us for the rest of our lives. No matter what else we do, we will always be that person's mother. We give our children the gift of ourselves, and they give us so much in return....Each mother-child relationship teaches us our limitations and our strengths. It changes us in constantly unfolding ways and entwines us in the unpredictable mystery of another life"*

When I spoke to Tom over the weekend I asked him what would he most like me to say today about Catherine today. His immediate answer was that she was an excellent mother. As Caroline Kennedy said;

Having a child defines us for the rest of our lives. No matter what else we do, we will always be that person's mother

I think Catherine was very happy to define herself in terms of being a mother to you, Dermot, Donal and Bernadette. Becoming a parent and particularly becoming a mother must be a very daunting thing for many women. From the time she was a young adult, Catherine struggled with illness and at times there was a lot of darkness and light seemed out of reach. That I'm sure made becoming a mother even more challenging. But I think it is true that the births and the raising of her three children was the happiest and brightest time of Catherine's life and like Caroline Kennedy would say that it was the best thing that ever happened to her. So today in the midst of such sadness we thank God for Catherine the mother and for the joy and fulfilment which being a mother brought to her.

Catherine Purcell was born in Ballyragget and she remained a loyal Kilkenny woman all her life. She was, I understand a very accomplished Camogie player, playing with Lisdowney alongside some of the most famous names ever to play the game. She met Tom in 1976 and after their marriage, they came here to Tom's home parish and live in Glosa. Catherine loved living in the countryside and she loved being outdoors and in touch with nature.

She also loved people and valued her friends and her friendships. Despite the fact that Catherine spent so much time, particularly in recent years, in various hospital and care settings, she maintained those friendships and she really appreciated the efforts that her friends made to visit her. We give thanks today also for the gift of loyal friends.

Because Catherine loved the countryside and being in touch with nature I'm sure she was very tuned into that extraordinary mystery of nature Jesus talked about in today's gospel. The mystery is that when the seed is sown in the soil it has to die before new life can come. Jesus thought of this when he spoke of the grain of wheat. It falls to the ground; it seems to die but in the act of dying and being received into the earth it gives birth to the green sprout, beautiful and bountiful. In the winds and storms of autumn the seeds are shaken from the branches. Sometimes they are caught by a gentle breeze, other times it is a violent storm that snatches them. In the end they fall to the welcoming earth which is

ready to receive them and is life giving. Dying is part of living and a step along the road of on-going life. In the words of the poet Tagore "*Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come*". Today we are gathered here in Rathdowney because in an earthly sense for of you who are Catherine's family and loved ones a very bright light has been extinguished in your lives. But for Catherine a new dawn has come.

I'd like to finish this little reflection with a blessing for Catherine as she leaves us today.

May the blessing of light be on you - light without and light within.

May the blessed sunlight shine on you like a great peat fire,
so that stranger and friend may come and warm himself at it.

And may light shine out of the two eyes of you,
like a candle set in the window of a house,
bidding the wanderer come in out of the storm.

And may the blessing of the rain be on you,
may it beat upon your Spirit and wash it fair and clean,
and leave there a shining pool where the blue of Heaven shines,
and sometimes a star.

And may the blessing of the earth be on you,
soft under your feet as you pass along the roads,
soft under you as you lie out on it, tired at the end of day;
and may it rest easy over you when, at last today, you lie out under it.

May the soil of this community rest so lightly over you that your soul
may be out from under it quickly; up and off and on its way to God.

And now Catherine, may the Lord bless you, and bless you kindly.
Amen.