

**Conor Cooke RIP**  
**Funeral Mass**  
**Rathdowney Church**  
**Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021**

*The death has occurred of Conor Cooke, Stephen Street, Waterford and formerly Rathdowney, Co. Laois. Passed away peacefully in the excellent care of the staff in The Regional Hospital Waterford. Sadly missed by his parents P.J. and Catherine, sister Adrienne, brother Derek, son Lee, daughter Faye and his heartbroken partner Sarah, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, relatives and friends.*

I'm standing here this morning before this gathering of people brought together by the common bond of the untimely death of Conor Cooke, a young man of thirty six years, a father, a partner, a son, a brother, a nephew, a cousin, a friend a man many of you knew well. I have to admit that I am struggling and have struggled these last few days to find any combination of words which might in any way respond to the grief and pain which is being so acutely felt in this church this morning.

Despite the inadequacy of words there are a few thoughts I would like to share with you today. Conor's family chose the first two readings today and I will come back to them later. I was trying to find a gospel passage which might in some way speak to Conor's life and his death. I was conscious of the big part that fishing had played in Conor's life so I went looking for one of those many Gospel stories where Jesus interacts with fishermen. Then I thought of that gospel scene where Mary stands broken-hearted at the foot of the cross as she looks on the dead body of her young son in his thirties. For you Catherine, and PJ and Sarah, Lee, Faye, Adrienne and Derek you too stand at the foot of the cross today and that very same grief that Mary felt is yours also. But then I began to read down through some of the messages published on RIP.ie. I was very struck by four of them:

*I met Conor many years ago. Conor was in a dark space but even then I found him a decent young man. It seems he got his life back on track and did many good things and I am so proud to have met you. God took Conor so young but I*

*do believe he has his reasons because Conor was a special person. May he rest on peace.*

*Conor you truly were a wonderful person and part of our family. You made Sarah so happy and loved her dearly as she loves you. Our lives were better for having known you. Rest in peace.*

*My sincerest condolences to all of Conor's family and friends at this sad time for you all . I didn't know Conor but my son did and he has great things to say about what a brilliant person and friend he was . My thoughts and prayers go out to Conors partner and his family and friends at this sad time for you all. May Conor get the best bed in Heaven.*

*Conor we are heartbroken, thank you for being such an inspiration to my son. For watching out for him, supporting him and being his friend. RIP Conor, you truly will be missed*

When I read those very moving messages I changed my mind about the gospel and decided to read the story of The Prodigal Son. I think there was probably more than a little echo of that story in the life of the young man we honour with Christian burial today. It has been said that if Jesus had only three minutes to tell us about God His Father and Our Father and how much he loves us then he would simply have told the story of the Prodigal Son. Everything we need to know about God and how he deals with us is contained within that story.

The first message I read out from the condolence page referred to 'the dark place' Conor was in some years ago. Those of you who knew Conor well know exactly what that Dark place was. It was a dark place which not only caused Conor a lot of pain but it brought hurt and pain to many others as well including many of you here who loved him very much. Like the young son in the gospel Conor found himself wandering in a far and foreign country, not in the geographical sense but in a sense that distanced him from much of what had been healthy and important in his life.

But like the young son in the gospel at some point Conor, also found a route back home, back home to a better version of himself. On that

journey home he was helped by many people, the people he met in places like Aishling in Ballyragget and Cuan Mhuire in Athy. Most of all he was helped by those who never gave up on him or never stopped loving him, those who allowed him to rebuild the bridges to family and friends which had been destroyed on the downward journey. None of that was easy for Conor or for you who were on the other side of those bridges. We all have to admit that there are times when we want to identify with the sceptical older brother in the gospel.

But ultimately this gospel story is not so much about wrongdoing of the younger son, or even the hard heartedness of his older brother. It is more about the love and forgiveness of God represented by the father waiting for his son to return. It is the same God who said those beautiful words in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah

*I have chosen you, not rejected you, do not be afraid, for I am with you, stop being anxious and watchful, for I am your God. I give you strength, I bring you help.....I am holding you by the right hand; I tell you, Do not be afraid, I will help you.*

*I have chosen you, not rejected you* When Conor Cooke did find his way back home to that better version of himself he went a step further than the young man in the gospel. As referred to in some of those messages I read from the condolence page, Conor used his own story of addiction and healing to inspire and help others. His own painful experience allowed him to have an empathy and understanding for so many others he encountered who were also struggling in different ways.

I want to leave you with two final thoughts:

Last Friday was the Feast of St. Monica. Monica was the mother of St. Augustine one of the most influential figures in the history of the Christian church. However for most of his young life Augustine was the prodigal son and he led a wild life breaking his mother's heart. Monica never gave up on him and she prayed every day that he would change his ways. Not only did he mend his ways but as I said he went on to become a very positive influence on many others not just in his life time but for many generations afterwards. As I mentioned last Friday was the Feast of St. Monica and Saturday was the feast of her son St. Augustine.

It was also the day that Conor died. Today I commend him to the protection of St. Augustine whose life finds an echo in his and I also commend him to the protection of Monica the mother that never gave up on him.

My last thought is simply to share a little prayer which I came across recently. It is a prayer of one living with addiction.

Recite the prayer from The Hope Prayer (Lawton) pages 130-133

.....Conor May your soul rest in peace