

James (Jimmy) O'Connell RIP
Funeral Mass
Monday 10th July 2023

James (Jim) O'Connell, 7 Erkina Court, Rathdowney, Co. Laois. 7th July 2023. Peacefully at home. Predeceased by his wife Kathleen and son Christopher, his brothers John and Bill, sister Mary and his parents. Sadly mourned by his loving family Carol, Breda, Mary, Fran, Seamus, Michael and Edward, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nephews, nieces, relatives and friends.

I once came across an interesting inscription on a tombstone in an old cemetery which read:

Dear Stranger,

Pause as you pass by,

As you are now, so once was I

As I am now, so once you shall be,

So prepare yourself to follow me!

After that inscription in stone some wit had written in chalk a little additional line. Now I wasn't sure if I could read it out here but as I understand it the man we honour with Christian burial today loved to tell yarns and stories, sometimes slightly scary ones so I'm going to chance giving you the full inscription and maybe Jimmy would approve.

Dear Stranger,

Pause as you pass by,

As you are now, so once was I

As I am now, so once you shall be,

So prepare yourself to follow me!

And the bit in chalk read.....

To follow you I'm quite content, but how do I know which way you went!

Now whether it is the longer or shorter version of that inscription that we read it is still a pithy little piece and somewhat sobering. But it serves to remind us that our life here on earth is perhaps best described in terms of a journey which we all undertake, a journey which, for people of Faith, has heaven as its ultimate destination, a journey where God is our companion and guide. It is a journey which has twists and turns, hills and valleys, rough roads and smooth ones too. A journey also seemed to me to be an appropriate image for Jim who spent so much of his working life making journeys, whether he was criss- crossing the highways and byways of Ireland driving lorries for the Lime works in Lisduff, The Irish Sugar Company or Avonmore. Then there was his hackney car business bring patients to hospitals and later again his shorter journeys around here with his Vegetable Van.

James O Connell's earthly journey began when he was born on the 25th of August 1932 to James O'Connell and Kate Treacy of Kyleahaw Errill. The first journey from his home happened the next day when he was brought to Grogan church to be baptised.

Following his school days in Errill began to work with his hands. Initially that was on the land and farming but his interest and skill in mechanics drew him towards the Lorry driving which he grew to love. In his early twenties he was to meet a young Rathdowney woman, Kathleen Browne and they married in Grogan on the 18th of April 1956. Initially they lived at the Browne family home in Daly Terrace but later moved out to the O'Connell home in Kyleahaw. In 1981 James and Kathleen and their family moved to live in Johnstown Road in Rathdowney.

As I think back over the various funeral masses I have celebrated for men and a few women too whose roots are in the Errill end of our parish there is one thing common to the vast majority of them and that is some mention of how important the bog was in each of their lives. After one of those funerals, I recall an Errill man of a somewhat younger generation taking me aside and gently reprimanding me. He had listened to me a few times and I think he felt I had overly romanticised this experience of

going to the bog and that I was ignoring what back-breaking work it could be. He made it clear to me that his age group did not exactly look at the bog with the same rose-tinted glasses of previous generations. To be honest I was in no position to argue with this man, but I suspect some if not all of you in Jimmy's family who were also obliged to do your stint on the bog each year might well agree with him. Nevertheless, as you have told me, your dad did love the bog. Like so many Errill people going to the bog and saving the turf was almost up there with hurling and religion and going to mass, it was part of his obligation to annually do to his duty to the turf.

One other annual journey which Jimmy made for many years was a pilgrimage to Knock which I think he organised. Like all good pilgrimages it was not all about the prayer and the religion. There was I understand built into the programme, time out for other kinds of Spiritual nourishment.

Having grown up close to the soil of Kyleahaw and later grown and sold vegetables, I have no doubt that James would have been very aware of the mystery of nature at the heart of today's gospel story. When the seed is sown in the ground 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. That very same mystery of nature is at the heart of our Christian faith. As Christians we believe that death, our death, is not God's final word in our regard. Yes, we die and yes, like the seed we are planted, buried in the earth but that act of dying and burial also gives way to a new life. Today is Jimmy's time to die and as we bring him later for burial at Bealady we realise in faith that sacred ground is today the gateway for him to his new and eternal life.

I began this homily today with a somewhat pithy and sobering reflection on life and death. I would like to finish with another one and one I know Jimmy O'Connell was VERY familiar with. One of the symbols ye brought up at the beginning of mass today was a cd of Big Tom's music. Jimmy was a huge Big Tom fan. Well one of big Tom's best-known song

was one called *We're going out the same way we came in*. it too is a sobering reflection for all of us on life and death

Let me finish by sharing some of the lyrics with you.

*Oh, we're going out the same way we came in
Don't matter who you know or where you've been
Makes no difference who you are
Skid Row Joe or superstar
You're going out the same way you came in*

*We are born into this world without a thing
And we leave it just as naked as we came
You may drive a Coup de Ville
Own a mansion on a hill
Don't mean nothing when Saint Peter calls your name
Oh, you're going out the same way you came in*

*Someone will notify your next of kin
Some will weep and some will moan
Some will spit upon your stone (hopefully not Jimmy)
But you're going out the same way you came in*

*Oh, they lay you out in all your fancy clothes
Then they'll figure out just who and what you own
Then the lawyers line their nest
And your kinfolk gets the rest
Ah, you can't take it with you when you go
Oh, you're going out the same way you came in*

James, Jim, Jimmy, may your soul now rest in Peace. Amen