

John Woods RIP
Funeral Mass
Durrow Church
Tuesday 11th January 2022

Peacefully at St Luke's Hospital Kilkenny. Beloved husband of Helen. Predeceased by his sister Claire and brothers Tom and Liam. Deeply regretted by his loving wife, children Brian, Anne, Dermot, Tracey and Sean, sister Mary, brothers Ger and Des, son in law, daughter in law, sisters in law, brothers in law, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, relatives, neighbours and friends.

I was not completely surprised that John's family would pick that first reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes for their dad's funeral. In John's life there has been a time and a season for many things. In recent days I have learned that in between John's work as a baker and confectioner, his love and commitment to his family he did have time for a few personal hobbies and interests. Those interests included fishing, gardening, nature and travel programmes on tv and listening to his favourite music. But the other great pastime was cards and in particular the games of 25 and poker. Although pretty much a non-drinker, John frequented many of the pubs in this town for poker rather than pints and for many years he and a group of his friends met in each other's homes for regular games of 25.

From my little experience of playing 25 and indeed any card game I know that there is no great difficulty in playing when you are dealt a really good hand. Equally so there is little difficulty in playing a really bad hand. The challenge comes when you are dealt a hand which is a mixture of good, bad and middle of the road cards. Such a hand requires a lot of skill and a bit of good luck as well. In truth most of our lives reflect that third hand of cards and the story of our life is the account of how we played the hand we were dealt.

Last Thursday evening, John Woods' earthly life came to a close just a few days short of his 80th birthday. John's story, his hand of cards is in some sense laid out before us today as we gather here for his funeral mass.

John's story began on the 17th of January 1942. The oldest of seven children, John was to live all of his 80 years of life here on Carrigan Street in Durrow. Due to the illness of his father, John left school early to take on responsibility for the family bakery business.

I have no idea of knowing whether John or indeed the other members of his family had an awareness of the unique service he and they have given to this community and far beyond over many years. I say that because of all the things that are both basic and important to our lives BREAD has a very special place. Bread is not just a natural food to satisfy our physical bodies, but it is also a spiritual food for our spirit as well. It is a symbol in every religion because it is both a way of sustaining the body and a reminder of basic blessings. I think of the fact that supermarkets so often place freshly baked bread close to the entrance to not only draw us in but there is something about the aroma of fresh bread which is comforting in a way that is hard to explain. I'm told that when people are trying to sell their house and potential buyers are coming to view it, there is now an aerosol you can get which supposedly gives off that smell of freshly baked bread and therefore subconsciously gives people the smell of HOME and may well encourage them to buy. You may remember when we had that terrible snow storm some years ago that went on for days and weeks, Whats App was bombarding us with images of bread being delivered in all kinds of ways. In a time of crisis the desire for bread seemed to go way beyond the need for food because somehow bread brought comfort, security, Joy and even a sense of community. So yes I would suggest that John Woods and the Woods family have brought something unique to this community and we give thanks to God for that today at John's funeral. Mentioning that word *unique* also reminds me that of course no two bakers make bread exactly the same. Be that somebody in their own

home or a baker in a bakery. Is it the recipe, the machinery or just in the kneading of the hands? I don't know. Whatever the reason, no two breads are the same and the unique taste of Woods bread, barmbrack and plum puddings was known and loved way beyond the boundaries of Durrow and even beyond County Laois.

John Woods took on the responsibility of the bakery as a very young man. That was in the late 1950's and early 1960's. It was an exciting time to be young. That excitement was best reflected in the music of those years, the emergence of the showbands, the opening of the dancehalls which became the mecca and meeting place for young men and women. A popular destination for many young people from this area was the famous Dreamland Ballroom in Athy. It was there in 1964 that John was to meet the love of his life, Helen ? a young nurse, born in Kerry, living and working in Carlow. I don't know if there was some significance back then, in a man waiting to be 24 before getting married but John and Helen married on the day after his 24th birthday, the 18th of January 1966. Over the years I have been to many weddings, I have blessed countless wedding cakes, I have witnessed couples cutting their wedding cakes, I have seen many more photographs of couples cutting their wedding cakes. But the photograph in John and Helen's front from is unique because of course it depicts them cutting their wedding cake which had not only been made but also completed iced and decorated by the groom himself.

In a few days time and the day after his 80th birthday, John and Helen would have been 56 years married. The fruit of their love was of course their five children, *Brian, Anne, Dermot, Tracey and Sean*. As you told me on Saturday family was a hugely important part of John's life, both the family he was born into and the family he and Helen created together. The arrival of grandchildren brought him further joy and he loved to see family come through the door. I'm very conscious that the last few months have been particularly painful for John as he said goodbye to his younger brothers, Tom and Liam

The second part of the gospel I chose for John's funeral Mass today is not one necessarily read very often at funerals. It was actually the gospel from Mass last Saturday and I thought it might be appropriate for John. At the heart of that gospel is an extraordinary story about what Jesus did with five loaves of bread and two fish. I gather that when John Woods was not making and working with loaves of bread, he was down the river looking for fish. Incidentally I was just thinking over the weekend that John Woods might just have an advantage over a lot of us as He meets Jesus, face to face. You know how when you meet someone for the first time, and you wonder what you might talk about. Well, it is a plus if you know something about the other person's interests. Well there is John the master baker and fisherman meeting up with Jesus who knew a thing or two about bread, who used it to get across some of his most important messages, and then when it came to choosing his closest collaborators the first people he picked were all Fishermen. So I suspect they will get on well together. Now if Jesus was to know something about the music of Charlie Pride or Tommy Maken and the Clancy brothers or where there might be a good poker game in heaven, then they would get off to a really good start.

The first part of the gospel we hear Jesus speak of the grain of wheat. I gather that John was very much a man at one with nature. He loved those nature programs on tv but he also loved to work in his garden. He nurtured that soil and prepared it to receive the seeds to be planted. The Flour which was the basic ingredient in his bread baking had its origin in those grains of wheat. Whether in the garden or the bakery over the years he may well have reflected on that very same mystery of nature that Jesus picked up on in the gospel passage

unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it produces much fruit."

Jesus used that powerful image to reassure all of us that his death and our deaths would not be the end of our story. Yes as the seed is buried so will we be, as the seed dies so will we, But also as the seed that dies

brings forth new life so we too will break forth into a new and eternal life. That Faith and that belief is a big part of the reason we gather here in this church today. Yes we want to thank God for and celebrate the life of John Woods. But we are also here to accompany John on his final journey as he begins a new and eternal life.

I'd like to leave you with a final thought today.

Firstly I know that John loved the music of the Clancy brothers and Tommy Makem. One of Tommy Makem's most beautiful songs was one called 'The Parting Glass' One verse from that song could indeed be John's parting words to all of us today:

The Parting Glass

*My dearest friends, the time draws near when here no longer can I stay
There's not a comrade I leave behind, but is grieving for my going away
But since it has so ordered been what is once past can't be recalled
Now fill to me the parting glass, good night and joy be with you all*

John, May your soul rest in peace.