

HOMILY FOR JOHN O'RYAN,
HOLY NAME OF MARY CHURCH, HUNTERS HILL

Tom Fulcher sm

(Scripture passages: *Apocalypse 21:1-5a, 6b-7; 2 Corinthians 4:14-5:1; Luke 24:13-35*)

It has been said that this story of how two downcast, depressed, and disenchanted disciples met Jesus, or rather, how He encountered them, on their way to Emmaus, is one of the most beautiful short stories ever written.

True, it is a short story. But as an account of the appearance of Jesus to his disciples after the Resurrection, it is very long. Only the meeting of Jesus with Simon Peter and six of the other disciples by the Sea of Tiberias is a longer account. This meeting of Jesus with these 2 disciples on the way to Emmaus must therefore have had a very special significance for the early Christians. It is very special for us also.

When Jesus chose to come into the lives of these two disciples he showed extraordinary sensitivity. He did not barge into their conversation and talk over them. He listened. It was only when they had poured out all that was bottled up inside them that he began to talk. He opened their minds to a new way of looking at the Scriptures and the events which had just happened in Jerusalem. The words of Jesus began to change the 2 disciples. Light began to penetrate their minds, and warmth began to penetrate the coldness of their hearts.

So impressed are they by Jesus that they invited him to stay with them for an evening meal.. It is at this meal, at the breaking of bread, that their eyes are fully opened, and it dawns on them – or we could say it hit them like a ton of bricks – that this man is Jesus himself. They are talking with, listening to Jesus himself. He is alive – he has moved beyond death. He has overcome death itself. He is alive.

First he opened their minds, but then he did something even better. He set their hearts on fire. “Were not our hearts burning within us as he explained the scriptures to us”.

Faith certainly is concerned with the mind, but its connection with the heart is far more significant. It is a relationship of love with God, God who first loved us.

I don't think there is a part of the Gospels which reminds us of Johnno as strongly as the Gospel we have just heard. Perhaps I could even say that Johnno would have felt more at home with these verses in Luke's Gospel than any others. Though that is desperately and dangerously rash – to suggest what Johnno would think or feel!

However, I'll stick with it for 2 reasons:

- (i) There is a description of 2 men going on a hike;
- (ii) There is a vivid description of people experiencing deep darkness, but moving on to brilliant light.

Johnno's great hobby or sport or recreation – really re-creation – was hiking; and he covered a lot of territory.

He walked just about every track there is around Cradle Mountain, and then twice walked the 5 day track from Cradle Mountain to St Clair. He covered many of the tracks in the Victorian Alps and other parts of Victoria; and he left his footprints on most of the tracks in the Blue Mountains, both in the Megalong and Jamison Valleys. He was also familiar with the tracks in the Lamington National Park around O'Reillys, including the Commando Track. He was an absolutely superb companion to walk with. He was an engaging and interesting conversationalist. Being a scientist, he would explain the geology of an area, and give you many other interesting little facts: such that vines in the southern hemisphere curl clockwise up a tree. But one could also walk with him for long periods in a peaceful and comfortable silence. He was a good navigator. Above all, he was a very good cook on a camp fire.

The second link of Johnno with our Gospel is the description in Luke of the mixture of dark despondency and exuberant joy. As a young man, Johnno stood tall and strong; as evidenced in the photo taken of him and Paul Glynn in their swimmers as they trained for their surf lifesaving bronze medallion when they were students. For my part, I think he had perhaps the sharpest, brightest, most incisive mind I have met. Yet for over 50 years he was afflicted with a terrible illness which at times weighed him down in darkness and left him weak. But, he bore it courageously, and in a way so as to cause as little worry or inconvenience to others.

A very close friend of Johnno, Michael Mifsud, a priest who walked many a mile with him, and sat around many a campfire, wrote an appreciation of Johnno. I would like to read part of it to you:

I met Johnno in 1977 in my first appointment as curate at Albion next door to West Sunshine parish. We became good friends almost at once, both delighting in bushwalking, bush tucker, animated conversation, and the sharing of prayer and the spiritual journey in its many varied facets.

It was hard not to notice Johnno in a group. He was in some senses: 'larger than life'. When he was energized and excited the undoubted brilliance of his mind shone out. I found wherever we went on our many excursions he was universally liked and warmly welcomed: in the home of parishioners, on the track, amongst fellow walkers, be they priests or laity, and in my own family circle.

His faithful embracing of the Marian dimension of spirituality over the years visibly softened his somewhat "sergeant-majorish" disposition of character. I experienced John as learning genuine humility, sensitivity to others and practical compassion as coming from a humble acceptance of his frailties and limitations arising from his "Bi-polar" type of symptoms which at times were quite pronounced and difficult for him and those who were with him.

Johnno will not be resting from his labours as he will be busy" having Fun "an ingredient he said was essential to life and sadly lacking today. He will be boiling the Billy, and grilling chops on his favourite "fire-Bucket", offering them as Jesus did the fish to his friends on the shores of Galilee.

With lasting and fond memories, Fr Michael Mifsud, Friend and Companion.

Johnno's appointments to where he ministered are printed in the Mass booklet. Of all of them, I am sure his 27 years of priestly ministry to the people of West Sunshine – by far the longest of any Marist – is the most significant.

Almost universally, the people of the parish were migrants to Australia, and generally they struggled financially to establish themselves, struggled with English at times, but were people of deep faith. To them all, Johnno was a friend, a carer, a priest, a teacher, a defender, a companion who walked with them on their journey in life. He was deeply loved by them all. Many were still in contact with him even when he was at Royal North Shore hospital. John loved these people, and gave himself to them with extraordinary generosity.

Although well acquainted with Theology, John had a beautiful simple faith. He was a man of deep prayer.

However, he was human, he did have his limits. He had a very low tolerance of people or things that were just for show. He had little time for people who appeared to him to be phoney.

He was a strong defender – at times a fearsome defender – of the underdog, of people who, he thought, were being treated unfairly.

Even in his last days at North Shore hospital he still had fire in his heart. Regarding a certain topic he said:

How terrible it is that we inflict this teaching on people. Even more, we make it compulsory.

In Johnno's novitiate group there were men of different bands. Among those in his novitiate group who were ordained were Peter Guiren, Wilf Radford, Jack Bettridge, Laurie Hannigan, and John McMillan. John was the last man standing. As scripture says: "Giants were born in those days".

Johnno, you were one of the giants. In current terminology you were truly a lifter not a leaner. You were a giant in the example you gave us of ministry to the needy as a Marist priest, as a man who had to live with both darkness and light, and as a man who gave us an extraordinary example of how to approach death, of how to walk towards it and embrace it. You were a giant. A man of honour and integrity.

May the road rise to meet you

(although I should say)

May the track rise to meet you

May the wind be always at your back

May the sun shine warm upon your face

And until we meet again, May God hold you in the palm of his hand.