

HOMILY AT Fr WALTER'S FUNERAL

In a passage with a similar theme to the Gospel (Matt 11:25-30) just read, Jesus says, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 18:3.) A book I am reading (*The Sunrise of Wonder* by Michael Mayne) calls this saying of Jesus 'a firecracker of truth.' We are asked not to be childish but child-like. That is to be born anew with a fresh awareness of the world and of each other. Children lack understanding of how people and things are linked together. Having travelled all of a couple miles from home they will ask, "Are we still in England?" But this lack has a benefit. They see the individual things and people with wonder and appreciate them. Thomas Traherne, a Welsh priest poet, says that as a child, "The streets were mine, the temple mine, the people mine, as much their sparkling eyes, their fair skins and rugged faces." Then he said he became corrupted and learned "the dirty devices of this world, which now I unlearn and become as it were a child again that I may enter the Kingdom of God." How do you become a child again? Well it's a lot to do with finding our true destiny as human beings. I think Walter's life and attitudes can help us.

Walter was born on 24th April 1919 in a district of Crewe called Monks Coppenhall, a walking distance from the famous railway station where many of us have changed and frozen. His father was a railway clerk who became mayor of the town. The parish priest, writing of the Catholic home Walter came from, spoke of the charitable works that emanated from there as being 'of an unusually high order.' He also mentions that Walter had two aunts in the La Retraite Order in France. He went to school, presumably as a boarder at St Bede's in Manchester. The Rector describes him as, "dutiful, obedient, willing and straightforward...disposition naturally simple and pious and showed himself the Catholic son of Catholic parents." On his entry form on joining the Order there is a question about any public examinations taken and he put 'School Certificate (Northern) failed.' That's what you call straightforward.

He was a novice in Chilworth in 1937 and came here to Woodford to study philosophy. Father Gervase, who was a contemporary of Walter tells the story of the *Traveller's Friend* across the road being set on fire by incendiary bombs. The students rushed across to help put it out. The then Provincial, Dominic, decided after that incident to send all the Franciscan students out of London to Buckingham and Walter was ordained there in 1945. Walter was not academic and he managed to get what he needed to be a pastoral priest. He was not a great theologian or preacher but he had a love for people. Incidentally Gervase confided to Brian recently that he operated at a deeper level than Walter.

Walter's ministry was exercised principally in our northern parishes of Craigmillar, Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool. In Liverpool he worked for *Calix*, a charity that dealt with alcoholics and he worked on the call service to offer help. I cannot see him being much good at it because I don't think he had the 'tough love' that is needed in him and he liked a drop of the stuff himself. He was at the Catholic Radio and Television Centre at Hatch End with Agnellus Andrew for a short while but it was too highfalutin' for him. He was a Guardian for a short time in Gorton, Manchester but he did not like the role. In a letter to the Provincial after his returns had been questioned he offered his resignation. It seems that was not the only trouble he had

there. The monastery was showing evidence of subsidence, there was a plague of ants, and the famous Brother Gilbert was playing up. Gilbert was once asked if he played a musical instrument and he replied that he played the pandemonium. Walter wanted to be just one of the friars, spotting what was needed, getting on with the friars and serving the people. He had no ambition for office and wanted to be like the people in the parish who were for the most part working people with no power. A tribute paid to him on the occasion of a Jubilee says, "You bring humour, joy, optimism and tremendous compassion to the service of the little people." He seems to have flourished in the one-to-one contact of visiting people, taking communion to the sick, anointing them: the personal work of priesthood that is not noticed except by those who receive it. This is an area of personal satisfaction for the priest that must be maintained and not taken over by administrative duties. This stress on the personal seems to me to be the fresh insight of the child. This identification with those without office also meant he could have the odd pop at those in office.

A particular way in which we miss him in Woodford was that his interest in people meant that whenever we had visitors in thanking us they always asked to be remembered to Walter. He had the knack of speaking easily to everyone. You may not know but he was an "expert" in classical Italian -- which no Italian understood. A friar from Assisi sent us a fond memory of Walter, remembering the classical Italian words *cheesio* and *coffeeo*. He loved to tease and I hear the young ladies in the parish were teased concerning their glamorous accessories. Sometimes however this teasing backfired on him. He asked a foreign visitor when he was leaving and when he heard it was tomorrow he said, "good riddance". The foreigner who knew too much English said, "All I have to say to you is if I never see you again it will be too soon." To visit him in his last illness was no chore because he was always interested in what was going on in your life and did not dwell on his problems.

One way in which he helped us to become children ready for the Kingdom was to help us deal with 'the dirty devices of the world' by bringing God's understanding, mercy and forgiveness to them. When he was no longer able to walk very well he still did a stint in the confessional box. I guess from his popularity he was an understanding and helpful confessor. Austin asked him last year if he was up to helping with 'first confessions.' He said, "I have never let the children down yet." Confession is a time when we stand before God to face the truth about ourselves. It gives us the opportunity to see with fresh eyes God's merciful care for us.

An important practice that Walter learnt at home with his good parents was prayer. Some of you have commented on his prayer before and after Mass. Much of what he said were learnt prayers from his childhood; sitting next to him I could hear snatches of them. This shows the importance of what parents teach their children in the matter of personal prayer. One prayer I overheard was one you may know. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary and Joseph assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you. Into your hands O Lord I commend my spirit." His life and prayer were a child-like preparation for that moment. May he rest in peace.