

Funeral Mass for Mgr Michael McKenna
St Gregory's, Chorley
9 September 2024

My dear brothers and sisters,

This is a day on which it is hard to find words. But I begin where Fr Graeme ended: with my thanks for your presence, and especially my thanks to Archbishop Malcolm for allowing me to lead this celebration of Mass. And I thank Fr Graeme for his moving account of Michael's life, and of his many achievements.

Everyone here has their own treasured memories of Michael. We bring them to the Lord as part of our thanksgiving for his life and gifts, even as we pray for the repose of his soul. My memories of him are many, rich and deeply precious. Yours will be too. There is so much for which we are truly thankful.

As well as being thankful, my mind and heart have been pondering on the legacy left to us by Michael. By this I do not mean so much the legacy of his achievements, but rather of his gifts, his character, his faith and his love. In this light, the loss we feel at his death can be, for each of us, an invitation to look again at our own lives and see what Michael has given us as an example to be followed.

Here are my thoughts, three great legacies for us to embrace.

First and foremost, Michael had such a strong 'joie de vivre'. He loved life, he loved company, he loved a party. Every day was a day for enjoyment, days never empty, days never dull. He delighted in

the pleasures of life. No wonder he chose, as the First Reading for his Funeral Mass, one that speaks of rich food and fine wines: a banquet! (Isaiah 25:6-9) This is part of his legacy: that we should never lose joy in life, never cease to celebrate. Indeed, even as he breathed his last, the champagne was in his fridge, to be opened and shared.

But let's be clear. His seeking and relishing pleasure and enjoyment was not that of a hedonist. It was never just pleasure for pleasure's sake. His joy was deeply rooted in a profound awareness that life itself is the gift of a bounteous Creator, who sees all that has been made and finds it 'very good' (Genesis 1.31). This faith lay at the heart of Michael's commitment to life and his joy in its every moment. In this his legacy to us is clear: if we want to cherish life to the full, then we must recognise and never forget its Maker. Life and faith belong together. Give faith in God a priority and then our spirits can soar.

Now this first legacy opens up into something more. Talents, Michael knew, are a God-given treasure. They are not to be wasted, neglected, cast to one side. Every opportunity for developing those talents was to be pursued, with imagination, courage and dedication. Indeed, it was this sense of the God-given dignity of each person that urged him on, to support, encourage and accompany so many. Young or old, in education, in enterprise, in service, he wanted everyone to walk with heads held high, realising their potential. Michael wanted this world of ours to reflect more closely the attributes of God from whom all life comes: qualities of justice, of compassion, of reward and of forgiveness. This is what he calls us to: to play our part in this to the full, just as he did.

Now, a second legacy he leaves us. And it is signalled in his choice of the Second Reading, from St Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 16:1-13,16). I've never heard this at a Funeral Mass before.

Its message is clear: treasure your friends; cherish everyone who walks alongside you, supporting you with love and encouragement. St Paul lists nineteen people, women and men, who have stood by him, suffered with him, given him hospitality and cared for him. Michael's list would be longer! But he clearly wants us to do the same as St Paul: never to take each other for granted; to stay in touch as far as possible; to share the burdens and to be loyal. He knew that a priest depends on those who give him their friendship, their love and their prayers. He cherished friendship and loyalty. We should do so too.

Here I would like to be a little more specific. There is a message Michael would want me to address to us priests. For him, loyalty and mutual support among priestly brethren was essential. Our bond, he would insist, is the priesthood itself, much more than shared opinions or tastes or even the criterion of personal friendship. We will honour his memory, and be true to our calling, if the bond between all us priests grows stronger every day, leaving out no-one but giving generous loyalty to all.

A joy in life as God's great gift; a cherishing of friendship and loyalty; and one more legacy of Michael lies in my heart. It is this: his great readiness to look forward with hope. The wisdom of St Francis de Sales, which you will find towards the back of the Mass booklet, chosen by Michael, says it clearly. Tomorrow is not to be feared. We can look forward in hope, not because our present

circumstances are fire-proofed, but because our future is secure in the redemptive plan of God.

The Gospel makes this unequivocal (Luke 23:23,39-43). This is the promise of Jesus, even in the face of death itself: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. There, the feast is already prepared for you. After all, this life is just a preparation for what is to come. Every party is a trial run for the wonder of heaven. Every gale of laughter is a promise of the all-embracing joy of heaven.

Dying is a tough business. Michael's dying was no different. Dylan Thomas speaks for many when he says 'Do not go gentle into that good night.... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.' But when the light of faith shines in that darkness, death becomes a going home. It is a going into a peace that satisfies every longing, into a joy, beyond time and place; an immersion in the glory of God, the glory for which we have been made.

And this is our prayer today: a prayer of thanksgiving for a life well lived and a witness, a legacy, powerfully given; a prayer of asking God to receive this faithful servant with mercy and forgiveness for his faults and failing (which, you may have noticed, I haven't listed!) and a prayer for his eternal rest and fulfilment in heaven.

Eternal rest grant to him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen.