

Homily at Class Reunion,
St Brendan's College, Killarney
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+ Dermot Clifford
Archbishop Emeritus Cashel & Emly

The scene from the parable of the Last Judgement which we just heard, has been painted by many artists, the most famous of whom is Michelangelo. It occupies the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Some of you have probably seen it or, perhaps, found it on the Internet. It is a very crowded scene. The dead of all nations, *panta ta ethné* are being summoned to face the final judgement. Our Lord is seated on a throne at the centre, surrounded by angels, patriarchs and apostles. The Angels are blowing their trumpets with vigour while the bodies of the dead are rising below him His mother Mary is disengaged by his side, not tugging at his sleeve as she did in the marriage feast at Cana. It is a very stark scene indeed.

Christ has his right arm raised, lifting the blessed toward Heaven while he is dropping his left hand to send the damned to Hell. The two arms of Christ represent the scales of justice, as the ultimate sentence is passed. Both the blessed and the damned are puzzled by the Lord's final sentence. The just ask, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty did not give you food and drink?" The damned make the exact same appeal, "As long as you neglected to do it to the least of my brothers and sisters you neglected to do it to me." The criterion on which the judgement is based is action, not good intentions or aspirations. There is no mention of heroic sacrifices on the one hand or heinous sins on the other! Just doing or neglecting the ordinary acts of kindness to the person in need, or, on the other hand, neglecting to help the neighbour in need. St Matthew's account makes extremely uncomfortable reading for everyone who lives a comfortable life without thought for and action in favour of the poor, sick and suffering at home and abroad.

I recall my very last words to you on the morning you left St. Brendan's at the end of the Leaving Cert in late June 1965. I sent you forth into the big world to find your feet in further education or in employment. They were as follows, "If at the end of your days will have everything but do not have Christ you have nothing. If, on the other hand, you have nothing except Christ you have everything". I did not expect to have the opportunity to address you again so soon! Here we are back this Chapel after 50 years, you are 67 or 68 years old now and I am 76! It would appear that I am even a bit late to wish you a happy retirement! Most of you have been married and have children and some of you have grandchildren. It is hard for me to believe. Each of you has a unique story to share and we look forward to hearing how you have fared since you left the Sem. It is wonderful that we have the leisure to sit down and spend time together today and tonight.

I was called to preach the Kingdom of God outside Kingdom of Kerry in 1986. I spent 26 years as Archbishop of Cashel and Emly and four years as Apostolic Administrator of Cloyne, both sentences running concurrently! I am only joking; I thank God the privilege of having served in both places. I had served eight years in St Brendan's, two years in the London School of Economics and 12 years as Diocesan Secretary with a voluntary Chaplaincy in St Mary of the Angels, Beaufort 1976 to 1986 running concurrently. And I thank the Lord for giving me the health to do so. *Buíochas mór le Dia.*

To return to 1964, when I had just been ordained in the Irish College Rome, I had been told that I would spend two or three more years there studying Canon Law at the Lateran University. Then out of the blue one morning, I received a letter from Bishop Dennis Moynihan which read, "Dear Father Clifford, I regret that I have to make a change of plans for you. St Brendan's College needs a Dean of

Discipline and a Professor of Science. You are to return for work in early September". I immediately thought to myself, "I will be the Professor of Science but I wonder who is the unfortunate man will be the Dean? That job would be the very last one I should have wanted. I went up the corridor in the Irish College to show my letter to Fr Michael Manning a Kerry priest who was completing his Doctorate in Canon Law. As he read the letter, he smiled broadly and said, "You have got two jobs, Dermot, Prosit, Congratulations! I was worried that I might be landed with the job of Dean." That fairly knocked me back I can tell you. It took the wind out of my sails!

When I returned home, I met Fr. Dan McSweeney a former member of the staff at St Brendan's now C.C. in Castleisland ", they will soon knock the smile off your face in Killarney", he told me with apparent satisfaction. But one day I was having lunch in Egan's restaurant in Portlaoise and Fr. Pat Joe O'Sullivan, who had just finished as Dean that June, came over to me from another table and said, "You are a lucky man, Dermot, this year's Leaving Cert class where a troublesome lot but all the thugs are gone now. Next year's Leaving Cert class are a lovely group". The word "thug" was much in use in St Brendan's at that time. In fact, there were three categories of boys there at the time. First there were the scholarship men, next the good footballers, after that the decent citizens and lastly the thugs! When Pat Spillane said on the "Sunday Game" that the Tyrone footballers were "thugs" he was reprimanded by the RTE Authorities. He was told to use the word "blackguards" instead. The original Thugs were Indian gangsters who posed as tourist guides and then strangled the tourists, buried their bodies and took their possessions. By comparison the thugs in St Brendan's were only middling thugs! The day pupils among you would divide the student body of the time into boarders, town dayboys and country dayboys, in descending order of importance.

Father Pat Joe O'Sullivan's words were very encouraging to me and meant a lot. Not only that, but his opinion of your class proved to be absolutely correct. When I arrived at the beginning of September 64 I was given some advice by the elders. Father Ned Corridan gave me this advice, "Be ruthless! If you make a threat be sure to carry it out." Father Dan Long who was visiting and was Dean long years before that said, "Be content with your pay as John the Baptist told the soldiers." My pay for the first year was £18-10-0 per month. But I was all found for 365 days of the year. The room staff put down my fire, cleaned the rooms and even polished my shoes! I did not realise how many benefits in kind I was given. At that time, the priests on the Staff handed over their cheques to the College as a contribution to the running costs. The students' pension at the time was £65 per year. Father Dermot O'Sullivan, who was Dean my first year in 1952 at St Brendan's gave me the best advice as follows, "Be yourself, be strict with the general body but be kind to the individual especially if he is in trouble. He was hugely supportive of me throughout my life. Go dtuga Dia leaba dhó 'sna Flaithis!

I was in the job for eight years and I can say with sincerity that your class the finest of them all. I had no part whatever in your formation. You were well-behaved, serious about your studies you took part in the sports especially the football and you cooperated very willingly with me in the extracurricular activities which I started. There were debates, concerts, quizzes, a fancy dress parade, a song contest and regular visits to the Fitzgerald Stadium on Sunday afternoons. We ended with a boat trip on the Shannon on June 16, two days before you began your Leaving Cert. We took in a film with Peter Sellers on our way home through Limerick that evening. I should add that Fr. John Moynihan was the "Real Dean". As President, he was unique, indefatigable and ubiquitous! When things seemed to be going well he always became very suspicious that some mischief was afoot somewhere among some of the boys. Years later, when I watched the British comedy "Porridge" Mr McCoy, the Scottish prison officer at Slade Prison reminded me of Moynihan in that he mistrusted the prisoners at all times! And he was usually right!

I am seven years older than you, as I said earlier. When I was 65 my class were celebrating 40 years of Priesthood and I was asked to address them. I rang the Central Statistics Office to enquire what the prospects were on average for men of 65 in 2004. Unknown to me, the CSO was now in Cork and a very good humoured lady answered me. "You are looking for your life expectancy, Archbishop. I will look up the table for you. You have 13.35 years to go". There was a long pause and she guessed that I was doing the arithmetic. "That will bring you to April 2018. But, cheer up, it might not be that long at all!" I rang them again the other day and another good lady told me that people aged 68 years have 14.5 years of life expectancy. I often noticed as I supervised study that your class spent almost half their study time on Honours Maths, so I am sure one or two of you went on to become statisticians! By the way, I am down to single figures myself at 9.1. Who knows? Man proposes, God disposes. And we must not forget Churchill's remark that there were three kinds of lies, lies, damn lies and statistics.

When I retired last February of this year I had a vague memory of an essay on the subject of retirement by Charles Lambe. I retrieved my old Leaving Cert textbook and I found the essay entitled, "The Superannuated Man. The only sentence which had remembered was that having spent years and years at an office desk, "the wood had entered my soul". I found the essay had far more meaning from me now than when I studied it in the mid-50s. Charles Lambe retired the age of 50 on to thirds of his salary which amounted to £450 per annum. He had spent 36 years working with East Indies Company in London. He worked a six-day week and only had a day off at Easter and Christmas and a one week's holiday in the summer. Small wonder then that he wrote to his friend Wordsworth as follows "I was set free on Tuesday last at 4 PM, and I came home for ever. It was like passing from life into Eternity. Every year to be as long as three i.e. to have three times as much real-time that is my own and it. I am now as if I had always been my own master. It is natural for me to go where I please, to do what I please. I have time for everything. I can visit a friend. I can interrupt a man of much occupation when he is busiest. I can insult him to take a day's pleasure with me in Windsor this fine May morning. It is a Lucretian pleasure to behold the poor drudges whom I have left behind."

In the light of the Last Judgement parable, we might examine how we use the free time we now have. We could visit the sick more, we might consider joining a voluntary organisation which works the caring service of the neighbour in need. Newly retired people are a great resource in our communities. Charles Lambe began to attend church more often than when he was at work. I have seen newly retired and women take up the practice of coming to daily Mass in the Cathedral in Thurles, usually at 10:30 AM. They have a chat and perhaps, a cup of coffee afterwards. One needs to have interests and projects. One cannot play golf all day every day! I purchased a computer last March as my handwriting has become almost illegible. I had the assistance of a secretary in Killarney and in Thurles and they spoiled me! I dictated letters and homilies and they turned them out in minutes. But I took lessons from a good lady who teaches people like me to catch up on years of progress in technology which I missed out on, I now dictate into the machine and, with a bit of luck, I am able to get things down on paper in a legible manner. But the project of learning something new filled in a difficult enough few months in my new way of life.

Charles Lambe described how he found a change in his relationship to his former workmates, "his co-workers of the quill", as he called them, when he visited the office. "Not all the kindness with which they received me could quite restore me to the pleasant familiarity with which I had heretofore enjoyed among them. We cracked the same old jokes but methought they went off but faintly. My old desk, and the peg on which I hung my coat were appropriated by another. I knew that had to be, but I did not take to it kindly." I personally experienced many of the same things as Charles Lambe described. Former colleagues get me off the phone more quickly than in former times. Of course, I realise that I tend to go on a bit as is the nature of old people! The telephone

does not go nearly as often as it used to when I was at work. I was very pleased with this and relieved early on but I began to miss the chats, the asides when business had been completed. Even in the family setting the wives of retired men are not too happy to have their husbands under their feet all day when they have retired from working away from home most of the day. There is one story I heard recently. "An ever-loving wife", I don't know whether this is Homer's phrase or Damon Runyon's, but anyhow, the good lady said to her recently retired husband one morning, "John, what are you going to do today?" "Nothing", he replied. "But John, you did that all day yesterday." "I did," said John, "but I didn't get it finished!"

My advice to you back in June 50 years ago still holds good. If, at the end of your lives and may you all enjoy long lives, if you have everything but do not have Christ, you have nothing. But if you have nothing only Christ you have everything. I think that in the interests of balance, we have to remind ourselves that the Christ of the Last Judgment is the Christ who used several parables to warn people to be watchful and ready at all times for His coming. But the Christ who walks with us through life is a much kinder and more merciful one. St Teresa of Avila, a great mystic, said the following: "A man can bear all things provided he possesses Christ Jesus dwelling within him as his friend and affectionate guide. Christ gives us help and strength, never deserts us and is true and sincere in his friendship." Or, in the words of Charles Lansbury, "He is my forever friend". Therefore, keep on the right side of Christ at all times so that you will end up on his right-hand side on the Day of the Last Judgement!