

Philip O’Keefe’s Homily- Colm Brophy SJ

In Cherryfield, last night, after John Maguire left. I stood beside the coffin and cried for a long time. But I was glad to see a golf ball in the coffin. You don’t see golf balls *in* coffins that often! If it wasn’t one of the family who put it in, then I guess it was Peter Doyle. Phillip loved his game of golf every week with Peter Doyle, when he was there, and with Br. Phil Russell, a Christian brother living in Mazabuka.

You remember the bit in the Acts of the Apostles about the Ethiopian galloping through the sand down the road to Gaza in his chariot. And the angel picked on Philip and transported him there. Like that, Philip was gone. Our friends walk off to God leaving us – buried - with sand in our mouths in the desert of our unbelief. Both Philips were transported off pretty quickly. Philip’s first cousin, Philip Harnett, was taken from us too at an early age. Which brings to mind the O’Keeffes, the Harnetts, the Tracys and the Houlihans and all the wider family connected to Philip with whom we are mourning here to-day.

You know the person who should be giving this homily is a woman. Not just any woman but one of the women who knew Philip as well, or I venture to say, better than most of us Jesuits knew him. That woman would be Celestine, a Mercy Sister from Kaleya Sugar Estate Mazabuka or another, Annie Jo who was with him in Monze, or Sr. Mary O’Brien a Holy Rosary sister who worked with him in Monze or Sister Madalene a Sister of Charity who worked with him in Nakambala Sugar Estate in Mazabuka. Or even better, one of the many women parishioners who worked closely with him for years - Mrs Emma Chembo, or the lovely teacher and youth worker Rufina Mwiinga in Monze, who now of course would have to shout across from the other side of the river. Or some of the Haamalambos or Kudomas or Bandas or Phiris, or Bwalyas or Mulengas or Inonges of Nakambala Sugar Estate.

I was terribly aware of his shyness with women. A good friend of both of us, who’s since dead, - the same Rufina Mwiinga – was with himself and Sr. Annie Jo one day. Philip said to her in his own humorous and slightly devilish leg pulling way with his dead serious face : ‘God, Rufina, you’re very close to that fellow Brophy aren’t you?’ Rufina looked him straight in the eye and like a shot said: ‘And I would be to you too if you’d *let* me.’ It was in that context that when driving down the M 1 on Monday from Leeds to Sheffield, thirty minutes after Philip had died I got a phone call from Donal Neary to tell me and then a text

from Annie Jo saying: Philip is dead. As soon as I could pull in I texted back spontaneously: ‘Rufina Mwiiinga, receive Philip up there wherever you are with the most unrestrained, unholy, hug and kiss you can possibly muster. I’m broken-hearted to hear he has died.’

Life as a child lasts an eternity. As a teenager it is crushed into seconds until it expands into the wonders of the twenties. The confidence of the thirties is followed by the certainties of the forties until life rushes on. Grandchildren want to appear – no matter how celibate you are – they want to appear – that desire to leave more than a forgotten whisper in the wind. When death comes to one of our family or friends – as it has come so suddenly to Phillip – we realize, at least for a day or two, that life is short. We are all in the waiting room, blissfully unaware most of the time, of how close we are ourselves to the departure lounge. Death makes the world our conversation parlour, chatting feverishly about our fond memories, our family histories, and our friendships lost and gained. Phillip never liked the limelight. It was often an agony for him to fulfil the role of Parish priest which puts you so much in the spot light.

Phillip is awe-struck today, lying here listening to us, with whatever ears death has, to find himself at the root and centre of an enormous number of conversations of people who know him. People in Zambia who admired and respected him, people in Zambia who loved him – friends who are no longer in Zambia, many who are here. His cherished Jesuit family and his treasured own flesh and blood and all of the extended family. Our special sympathy to his brothers Dan, Rory, William and David and to his dear twin sister Molly and all of their spouses, their children and friends. Our special condolences too to John Dooley and Sebastian Malambo who are now taking the place of Phillip in the parish. To the sisters next door and the other communities and to the people of Nakambala Parish who will be deeply sad at his death and very disturbed that they cannot bury him among them where he has lived and worked.

Phillip was my friend. Our life’s correspondence could easily fit in your smallest pocket. Many here might have lost contact with him because of his pocket size communications. Many here too can say he was their friend. Certainly I know many a person in Zambia who would say emphatically: *Phillip was my friend*.

It’s many a night in the early nineties that I sat in the sitting room of St. Kizitio’s Pastoral centre Monze with the two Clare men with whom I was privileged to live. Two genuinely saintly men. The elder statesman, John Coughlan, would stand up promptly at eight pm and announce “All right

boys, I'll leave you to it. It's time for me to retire." And he'd toddle off to his room to the Greek New Testament and Tonga New Testament laid out side by side on his desk – no English – and he'd prepare his homily for the following day. Meanwhile myself and Phillip would switch off the serious stuff and put on a video tape, in those days it was the special Late Late Show tribute to Sharon Shannon - another famous Clare woman.

The long drawn out notes of the accordion are the years of love and struggle, the years of pastoral planning, the years of walking with, that Phillip did from the time he first boarded the plane in Dublin for Zambia in August 1970 with Joe Hayes and Stan Farrell. He walked with care and love in his own humble, shy, unintrusive manner. First in Mumbwa in the late 70's where he had to learn ciNyanja and some Shona. Then in Monze, Maamba, St.Mary's Monze and finally Nakambala Sugar Estate, Mazabuka. While he walked unobtrusively yet he could lay down the law with people in a most fruitful and containing way. And his shyness could disappear like a cloud in a sunburst when he would sit and read for you with enthusiasm some favourite poetry or throw out one of his humorous and acute observations of the human situation. Or, offer his funny, sometimes painfully frank, comments on a person's foibles.

Phillip was very honest with himself and had no ambitions to power. He had a really hard time with his inner self. I know some of the intense personal agonies he went through. He was low and depressed a lot of the time. And still he could ride the waves of the unconscious and throw humour and good sense to his fellow travellers. Even here in hospital, the last time I spoke with him from Sheffield on the phone, he displayed his wry humour. I asked him how he was managing with all the visitors while feeling so weak – knowing also that in his very introverted nature he likes to put a limit on seeing people. "Well", he says, "I'll tell you, it's like in the old days in Ennis when Duffy's circus used to come to town. They used to have this little tent where we'd have to pay sixpence to get in. People would come, half out of guilt and half out of curiosity to see the cow with six legs." The he paused . " Since they put me in this wheel chair - I'm still counting my legs."

He found it enormously difficult to retain the energy to keep going in his parish work. But he was utterly faithful to it.

And now the darkness of the open door into some small African house is reflected on the blue water across the river where he has now gone. Maureen and Bill, his parents are there to meet him. Rufina Mwiinga and

Jennifer Ndimma and Norman MacDonald and many many others are there too. There is a blaze of light from the warmth and love flowing out and around and inside that distant house on the other side. Of which we know nothing. Just nothing. Philip has climbed the mountain and seen nothing on the slopes. And now he's reached the top and... well, *we* can see nothing.

A family phoned me recently asking me to pray for her husband dying of cancer. Of course I said I would. But I was aware of my own very uncertain faith. "Oh," she said, "I'm glad we have you on board, I'm really glad we have you on board". I thought to myself, "I may be on board, I may be in the ship, but the question is, 'is the ship in the water?' And if it is, what sea exactly are we setting out to cross?" I felt a bit like Jonah. Throw me overboard. Death brings up all these unresolved questions in us.

Philip was a man of faith.

I look at you now Philip in wonder and admiration. Thank you for your friendship. May you rest in peace.