

Service to mark the Reverend John Sullivan SJ

Christ Church Cathedral Dublin, Evensong Trinity ii June 14 2015

St Mark 10.27: *Jesus looked at them and said: For human beings this is impossible, but not for God; everything is possible for God.*

INTRODUCTION

Recently I had the opportunity to watch the film: *The Imitation Game*. As you know, it tells the story of a number of people, and in particular the story of Alan Turing, a brilliant young man, who broke The Enigma Code during the Second World War. One phrase stuck with me and I wonder if somehow it might offer at least a partial approach to describing the man whom we honour today and it goes like this: *Sometimes it's the people no one imagines anything of who do the things no one imagines*. Purists will rightly wince at the grammar, but I think the sentiment is quite helpful. It is a gentle way of describing people who are quite remarkable, indeed unconventional, as history discloses them, allows them to unfold, almost despite themselves; yet the wonderful thing is that they never expected to be thought of as great and may never even have wanted to be such; and it rather embarrasses them into the bargain; these are the very reasons they are delightful and saintly and memorable – there is not an ounce of spiritual contrivance or ambition in them. And that really *is* saying something!

Such may indeed have been the fate of that extraordinary man John Sullivan SJ - or as I prefer to call him: OPSJ: Old Portoran *and* Society of Jesus - whom we gather to honour today. He was a much-loved human being and priest. He touched the lives of countless people across a wide spectrum of society and he did so without pretension. We are here in Christ Church Cathedral for a specific reason. John Sullivan was baptized in the Church of Ireland Parish Church of St George in Hardwick Street; it is no longer used as a Church of Ireland church, so it seemed fitting that we bring our praying and our praising to the cathedral in this time of reflective recollection of John Sullivan. We meet today as the church of God in the mother church of this diocese, Christ Church. Like all of us, John Sullivan's baptism was the point at which, as a child of God, he began formally his belonging to Christ; the rest of his life in all of its extraordinary diversity and rich variety flows from this. For each one of us, baptism is the beginning and the fullness of it all. The rest gives this fullness voice and verse.

UNIQUENESS OF THE OCCASION

It is a delight for me to welcome to Christ Church Cathedral all of you who have made the time to be here this afternoon. I welcome a wide range of people: members of the Gardiner Street Parish and Community; members of the Jesuit Order nationwide; members of Clongowes Wood School and of Portora Royal School past and present and all others who have, for whatever reason, made a special journey of pilgrimage to worship God here today. The presence of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin is a great delight

to me; he is a firm friend in the work of God and I greatly enjoy our co-operation. I wish to thank also the dean, the Very Reverend Dermot Dunne and Fr Conor Harper SJ; and members of the wider family of John Sullivan for coming today.

None of you here this afternoon probably needs to be reminded of what makes John Sullivan so special in the life of Ireland, as history has dealt its hand in our complex, indeed contorted, national life. He spent half of his life as an Anglican and a layperson and half as a Roman Catholic and a priest-and-Jesuit. Anglican and Roman Catholic; lay and ordained: these for long have played their part as interlocking and interacting identities in Irish life and frequently have been seen as incompatibles and contradictions. We can throw into this equation the fact that he was educated in Portora Royal School, Enniskillen a school which is now in today's Northern Ireland.

Antipathy and antagonism should not be the case, nor should they be the way of life itself. All of us find that increasingly, as things change and develop, imperceptibly yet at an ever-increasing pace, people are exploring traditions that are not their tradition of religious and spiritual origin under their own steam. By the same token, there are people who are asking questions of inherited religious traditions that were never before asked directly, head to head, of those traditions. It is an exciting time to be a child of God. It is not without its difficulties or its whirlwinds, but the energy is there and the challenge for all of us who profess Christ Risen is to give a coherent and courteous account of the tradition that we cherish in a contemporary context and world. This helps us to give honourable and honest answers to the questions of those who embrace traditions that differ from ours and yet have an umbilical link through baptism and belonging. We need to continue this quest for courtesy and comprehension in being able to give an account to those who simply have no idea of the things about which we are talking.

JOHN SULLIVAN - SOME ENDURING CHARACTERISTICS

Many people here today will have their own pictures and impressions of John Sullivan. This will be true whatever association you have had with his life and ministry of service of others. He was a person who moved from sophistication to simplicity when the majority of people seem to crave moving in the opposite direction. As he developed in the expression of his discipleship and in his priestly work, what may indeed have seemed to many as his eccentricity in so many respects made him *more* rather than *less* loved. I cannot but ask the question: Are we capable of such toleration and affection today, of letting humanity shine through the light of divinity, when church life truly is in need of massive structural overhauling and when the cult of second-hand celebrity has taken hold of so much personal identity? There is something deep within us that knows that managerialism has wreaked havoc on the dynamic of faith and of possibility and potentiality in the church, as also has neo-orthodoxy. We are alarmed by it, yet we seem to lie down before it. John Sullivan was much more of a free spirit; he lived the life of a saintly person at the heart of a pulsating, independent academic and intellectual community in Clongowes (and before that in Portora) and still he bridged the gap with countless faithful people for whom the Community Church was in fact their Parish

Church in County Kildare. He saw no contradiction between independence and faithfulness and, clearly, neither did God.

Many years later history has given the opportunity to reflect on his contribution in the widest sense. Something he could probably never have envisaged is the effective and imaginative twinning of Clongowes and Portora through the annual Joyce-Beckett Literary Award and by means of other exchanges between the two schools. At the height of a politically divided Ireland, this was a shining light of witness to tolerance, to inclusion, to creativity and to respect for difference. And, most poignantly, it involved the repeated and consistent presence of boys and teachers from Clongowes in Enniskillen on Remembrance Sunday laying a wreath at the Cenotaph. This vignette of courage, year after year, became an icon of hope in a town where nobody has yet really admitted responsibility for the human tragedy and the travesty of The Enniskillen Bomb.

FROM LEGACY TO PROSPECT

John Sullivan makes a sustained and probing contribution to the aspirations and agonies of contemporary Christianity in Ireland lived ecumenically. He holds up a mirror of transition in what appears to many as an era of stagnation. He holds out the hand of engagement in two directions in what appears to many to be a time of emptying churches and is in fact a time of many more religious directions than the two inherited and rather tired directions of Old Ireland. He holds out the confidence to travel spiritually *within* himself at a time when many are fearful to commit *beyond* themselves. And he does this for the following reasons. The first is that he witnesses to the two communities of faith and division in Ireland to both of which he belonged - and many would argue to which he brought a broader comprehensiveness and more generous spirit through his adherence to each. And he did this before it became, in any sense, fashionable. It would surely have been tremendously difficult and, like so much else in Ireland, watched eagerly through the twitching net curtains of know-it-all self-righteousness. And, secondly, he throws into the air in our own day the challenge to all the churches to live, in hope if not in fact, by the maxim that the church is *truly only* and *only truly* itself when it *is* together and *does* together everything that it *can be* together. By crossing the fault-lines of fear, John Sullivan asks: Is what unites more life-giving than what divides? and also the secondary encouragement: Please keep searching for what unites!

JESUIT INSPIRATIONS

Today is very much a day for the Society of Jesus in Ireland and we are delighted to worship and to rejoice with you. We know the Jesuit living legacy in scholarship, in education, in justice and in pastoral care. For my own part, as I exercise a simple ministry of service from day to day, I point to three Jesuits who, in particular ways, have inspired and focused the ministry that is not mine but the ministry of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world, yet one which I greatly enjoy. One is Michael Hurley who taught me the principle of tithing ecumenically my spiritual time; another is David Tuohy who taught me that followership is every bit as important, if not more important, than

leadership; the third is Pope Francis who taught me that kneeling in solidarity with the poor is the definitive place where the Gospel is revealed.

John Sullivan teaches us all that an Ireland divided along denominational lines need not close down movement and holiness. Understood and used properly, good things can and do happen and will continue to happen. This is an inspiration we all need today for tomorrow and tomorrow for the next day.

1 John 3.1,2: *Dear friends, we are now God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*

The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson, archbishop of Dublin