

**REQUIEM MASS FOR FR PETROC HOWELL  
ST CHAD'S CATHEDRAL: 30 NOVEMBER 2018**

***Happy are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.***

It is our prayer in this Requiem Mass that our dear friend and brother priest, Fr Petroc Howell, will now experience the fulfilment of that beatitude. It carries the invitation of our Lord to Petroc to take his place in the kingdom and to look forever with humility and simplicity of heart upon the face of God. Fr Petroc must have proclaimed that Gospel many times in the course of his priestly ministry of nearly sixty years and he must have prayed and reflected on the purity of heart which it sets before us. I sense that this is true because that purity of heart had become naturally and spontaneously Fr Petroc's outlook on life by the time I first met him nine years ago.

Purity of heart is not the same as naivety. Fr Petroc was fully aware that every life is held back by some degree of sin and selfishness that needs to be purified and he would not have judged himself to be better than others. But he retained a capacity for surprise and a child-like delight at the good things that came his way and his reaction would surely have been no different when he was summoned to take his place in the kingdom.

The picture I have of Fr Petroc and his ministry comes from observation of his manner to me and to others over the last nine years along with the testimony of his family, his brother priests and his friends. It is the picture of a humble, joyful and patient man who was entirely content with his life as a follower of Jesus Christ – and of an untiring, faithful and caring priest who looked upon the world with the eyes of faith.

Fr Petroc's commitment to Christ flourished as loving service of the people he was sent to serve. His spiritual journey as a priest over fifty-nine years was characterised by that purity of heart which sees goodness in others before it sees their failings. In seeing people's goodness Petroc came to recognise the presence of God in them. His prayerful heart was purified as he saw the Lord day by day - until the day he was called to meet the risen Lord and to enter into the kingdom that he had so often proclaimed. This final meeting with the risen Christ was not a conclusion but a moment of transformation.

It is the transformation of a spiritual journey that began eighty-five years ago in Egypt, in the British Military Hospital in Ismailia. Near to the Holy Land Petroc first experienced those ties of family affection which have sustained his life and ministry every since. He demonstrated an adventurous and determined streak early on in life by putting out to sea in a tiny boat with his two elder brothers – only to be rescued by the Harbour Master. Still, we are told that his patron St Petroc achieved great things with only a cockle shell.

In his school days at Alton Castle and Cotton College he began to appreciate the history of the Catholic Midlands and this remained an absorbing interest for Petroc throughout his life. At Cotton he competed with his cousin, Fr Dominic Round, to see who would be the quickest to lead Night Prayer.

But prayer became a central part of his life as he pursued his vocation to the priesthood, first at Grove Park and then at the Venerable English College in Rome. He developed an abiding love for the Eternal City and his letters home at that time are filled with descriptions of Rome's basilicas, galleries and fountains. Petroc's appreciation of art and literature would enrich his preaching and his ability to see God in the beauty of creation.

Over his fifty-nine years of priestly ministry Fr Petroc served in eight different locations, as assistant priest at the Holy Rosary, Saltley, St Chad's Cathedral and St Giles, Cheadle, with four years at Grove Park teaching Scripture. Together with St John Vianney, Coventry and Holy Cross, Walmley, the core of Fr Petroc's pastoral ministry was the twenty-six years he served at St Patrick's, Dudley Road and as Chaplain to the City Hospital.

His care for the sick was matched by his tireless work for the pro-life cause and the interest he took in the parish schools wherever he was based. His passion for history was evident in his role as diocesan archivist and his love for Staffordshire – fostered in Alton and Cotton College and nurtured at Cheadle and Aston Hall found expression in his life-long membership of the Staffordshire Historical Society.

In the evening of his life Fr Petroc returned to Staffordshire where he was Chaplain to St Joseph's Home in Stafford and where he eventually retired with the community of priests at Aston Hall. Although he loved walking and cycling in the countryside and travelling by train, he was not a solitary – he enjoyed the company of family, priests and parishioners and the conversations this occasioned. He was a priests' priest and the most faithful participant in clergy funerals.

As we ask the Lord to forgive Fr Petroc's sins and to welcome him into the company of the saints we pray that he will indeed see God with amazement and joy now and for all eternity.

There is a beautiful poem in the Breviary written by Thomas Campion in 1613 and which Fr Petroc must have known. I think it evokes the longing of his priestly heart that has now found its fulfilment:

*Never weather-beaten Saile more willing bent to shore,  
Never tyred Pilgrims' limbs affected slumber more,  
Than my wearied spright now longs to flye out of my troubled breast:  
O come quickly, sweetest Lord, and take my soule to rest.*

*Ever-blooming are the joys of Heav'ns high paradise,  
Cold age deafs not there our eares, nor vapour dims our eyes :  
Glory there the Sun outshines, whose beames the blessed onely see ;  
O come quickly, glorious Lord, and raise my spright to thee.*

***Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord...***