

Homily by Fr Martin Boland, parish priest at Our Lady of Lourdes, Wanstead

"You must preach the resurrection." This was Bishop Thomas's direct instruction to me. He was not speaking to me as a bishop, but as a man close to death and preparing for the journey home. The challenge of preaching the resurrection at a funeral is to do so without a glib dismissal of death. Death is the great enemy. We sense its power. We who personally and collectively grieve the loss of Bishop Thomas can vouch for this.

Yet our gathering here today is an act of defiance because this assembly celebrates the truth that death will not have the last word. The last word can only be spoken by God and that word is life. The new life of the resurrection. God will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. This morning we allow the Lord's resurrection to break upon us as it catches Bishop Thomas in its rip tide, carrying his soul to Almighty God. The duty of the preacher... our duty is to aid his journey by finding our voices and surrounding him with the Easter proclamation: The Lord is risen - *Surrexit Dominus*.

Over the main doors of this cathedral, those words, *Surrexit Dominus*, are carved into the stone lintel. They are the key to understanding this building, but perhaps also something of the man. I recall Bishop Thomas preaching here one Easter Sunday referencing a vivid image that G.K. Chesterton used to describe the early Christians as holding a key in their hands, and that key was their faith in the risen Lord. The key, Chesterton writes, that could unlock the prison of the whole world and let in the white daylight of liberty. With its high windows, this cathedral exists to let in the white daylight of liberty. The light of Easter morning pouring through the fabric of time and place allows us to see that we are free men and women in Jesus Christ.

Oh death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting? But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Written in stone and space and light, this building is Bishop Thomas's most important homily and one that has been preserved for future generations to hear.

On December the eighth, 60 years ago, the Second Vatican Council closed, but it had opened up in Thomas McMahon a profound conviction. This is widely recognised though it is sometimes accompanied by the relativising cliché that he was a "man of his own time". I would like to suggest something bolder and timeless. Thomas McMahon's conviction was that the tone and the insights of the Council existed for one purpose alone: to sanctify the world. The helix of liturgy, the word of God, ecumenism, and engagement with society created a spiral thread within his being.

It is no accident that Bishop Thomas insisted that the altar stands at the heart of this building. Its position is surprising, for some disconcerting, but it's a powerful sign of Christ. It's him here with us now. Christ on his redeeming cross, Christ stepping from his tomb, Christ showing us his glorious wounds. He alone is the still, fixed and central point in the feverish carousel of our earthly lives.

For Bishop Thomas, the position of this altar captured the central action of the liturgy: that Christ is visibly lifted up and draws all men and women to himself. Bishop Thomas believed that we were to become a biblical people, attentive to the voice of Jesus. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Those who were ever given a tour of the cathedral by Bishop Thomas will recall his pleasure in explaining that the ambo and the altar are set at the same height, emphasising their singular purpose in proclaiming that if Christ has been raised, then the victory also belongs to all that is good and true and beautiful.

Victory belongs to unity, and unity is made visible when we allow the breath of the Holy Spirit to fill our lungs and we deep dive into our common baptism that raises all Christians to new life and the promise of a future that must include the unity of the church. "I believe," wrote Stephen Cottrell, the former Bishop of Chelmsford, now Archbishop of York, "I believe that because of Bishop Thomas's work and witness, the Christian community in Essex worked more closely together than in almost anywhere else I know in this country."

That work and witness was also evident in his commitment to our young people, to education, to the role of the laity, and his fearless advocacy for the weakest and poorest. His commitment to Albanian refugees following the Kosovan war, campaigning for a test ban on nuclear weapons, the polite but steely moral force behind his many letters to politicians. The linking of this diocese with the Diocese of Dundee in South Africa and so much more.

But I suggest that there was one building as important to him as the cathedral, and that was Anchor House - now Your Place in London's East End. It was he who secured the property for one purpose: to serve the homeless. And with the initial help of generous donors, he laid its financial foundations. When I visited Bishop Thomas just weeks before he died, he said that this was the achievement he was most proud of. Anchor House allowed the white light of liberty to irradiate the lives of so many men and women. It continues to do so.

Was he capable of frustrating and irritating both clergy and faithful? Yes, but all bishops are and on occasion they do. Of course, it also needs to be said, it works the other way as well. He knew his mind. He had a sense of purpose. He could be dogged, at times tenacious, easy to mimic, impossible to caricature. He was urbane, thoughtful and kind. How many of us here are in possession of a handwritten note from him whose words proved a balm of consolation and hope in times of difficulty? I, and I suspect many other clergy past and present, experienced his care and concern, so too the people of God.

Many years ago a woman contacted the Bishop's Office. She was looking for a priest who would bless a common grave where she knew the mortal remains of her aborted child had been buried. The Bishop's Secretary drafted a sensitive response advising her to speak to her parish priest. The advice was correct, but when Bishop Thomas read the draft, he decided to contact the woman personally. He met with her, prayed with her, and blessed the grave. In all his grace and fragile humanity, Bishop Thomas was above all a disciple, allowing himself to be prised open daily by the Easter mysteries.

Now we raise Bishop Thomas in the eucharistic arms of the church to the sanctuary of Christ's risen body. We will plant the seed of his body in the wintry earth expectantly waiting for that springtime when, cleansed of any trace of sin, he will stir from his grave and inherit the great promise in which now we dare to hope. In the face of death, my brothers and sisters, we are defiant. We know God will be true to his word, true to our brother Thomas, and it will be said on that day: Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him that he might save us. This is the Lord. We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. *Surrexit Dominus*. Alleluia. Alleluia.