Memorial Homily

By Fr John Warnaby

Jeremy was received into the Roman Catholic Church as a 17-year-old schoolboy in Newcastle in the Dominican Priory in the City. This was at the current priory, the foundation stone laid in 1869, and Henry Cardinal Manning presided at its subsequent consecration.

The Dominicans were no strangers to Newcastle, having established a priory there in 1239 in the north west of the City, just inside the walls. The Church and much of its property was destroyed in 1538, but some of the buildings remain and house a popular restaurant called Blackfriars. Its cocktail list is impressive and I am sure Jeremy would approve, although surely sceptical of the claim on the website that it is the oldest dining room in the UK. The website encourages us to follow them on Twitter: “Follow the fat friar”. That would have made him chortle too, and he would doubtless have had at his fingertips a gently salacious titbit or two about Edward Balliol, the on and off King of at least part of Scotland, who parleyed there with Edward III.

We gather that the 17-year-old Jeremy was instrumental in other classmates also being received into the Catholic Church: are any of us remotely surprised that the young Catto was someone whose peers followed, whose advice was heeded, whose example was imitated?

John Henry Newman, Blessed John Henry, no stranger to this pulpit, left us the meditation: “God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.”

In many ways Jeremy’s vocation was obvious: a teacher par excellence; historian, leader, counsellor, confidante and loyal friend. The range of work committed by God to Jeremy was unique and he benefited from an extraordinary skill set. I think of him as the most benign of spiders, at the centre of a web of affection and love that spread across the generations. A web in which we were all of us all too happy to be captured.

All Christians are called to be in the world, but not of the world. He loved life and lived it to the full. And he lived that life as St Paul says to the Romans “in generosity, in cheerfulness, in showing honour”. He was indeed “patient in suffering”; all through his life he “persevered in prayer”.
As a teacher and friend he encouraged one to think differently. I treasure the memory of a holiday in Naples. I never had a tutorial with Jeremy, but I was given the holiday version: impromptu anecdotes about the kingdom of the Two Sicilies, a trek to find the part of the coast where Thomas Aquinas’ sister had been swimming. One day was intended to be a visit to Herculaneum in the morning (abbreviated, natch, to Herc) then lunch, and Pompei. His version of the guided tour of Herc was fascinating and very amusing. When we eased into the local restaurant for the mandatory Campari and soda, I asked him how Pompei compared with Herculaneum. “Larger” came the reply, “but not so good on detail”. “So why are we going to Pompei?” I asked. “How clever you are”, he smiled, “to hell with Pomp.”

His generosity was prodigious. He drew his cash from the bank here in £5 notes “for tipping purposes”. His rooms always the warm hearth of hospitality for students, colleagues, members of the College, in residence or visiting, and guests. The nightcap music never really varied – Marlene Dietrich gave way to Noel Coward’s Bar on the piccolo Marina and the Master was required in turn to give way to Bryan Ferry’s rendition of Miss Otis regrets.

His life was one of remarkable generosity of spirit. He was conscious of his own frailties. He received the sacrament of reconciliation or confession frequently. He would be aware of the frailties of others but not judgemental. He was there to help, to listen, to advise if necessary. He was a persistent advocate for those who needed help or encouragement. He loved the College and he loved his friends.

He died fortified by the rites of Holy Church. Loved into existence by God, our prayer is that the angels will carry him to the bosom of Abraham. United with those who have gone before him marked with the sign of faith, as he beholds the holy City, the new and eternal Jerusalem, we imagine the exclamation so often on his lips on earth, “wow!”