

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen +

Good morning. My name is Vivien Hannon, and I am the assistant priest at St Mark's Church here in the North End. I want to begin by humbly thanking Irene's family and Father Andrew for the privilege of speaking to you here on this solemn and special day. A day when we, Jean, Joseph, Rita, Christine, Anne Marie and Janet, and the rest of Irene's family and friends, gather to remember Irene Clark and commend her to God's keeping.

Irene has touched the lives of so many people, and we each have our own relationship with her. She was a daughter, sister, friend, co-worker (in her employment and in the many unpaid projects she took on to help others), caregiver, neighbour, cousin ... someone whose life intersected with ours, for a short time or a lifetime.

I had the gift a few days ago of reminiscing about Irene with one of her sisters, who shared some of her memories and those of others in the family. Most of you will have known Irene longer than I have. I met her about 4 ½ years ago when I first came to St. Mark's, for at that time Irene and Jean were regulars at our early Sunday service. Through them, others and I came to know some of her wonderful family. As the years passed, in worship, Bible studies, meetings, ACW, and the events at the church, we became better acquainted. Irene was of course also part of faith communities here at St Mother Teresa, at the former St. Joseph's, at St. Brendan's, at Northwood, and perhaps elsewhere as well.

Irene also paid attention to, and took part in, issues relevant to her local community, getting involved and writing letters. She was mindful too of standing up for, and serving, individuals. Her choices to take time to care for members of her family were for her not a sacrifice, but a joy. And her close friends were a part of her life which meant a great deal to her.

To her nieces and nephews, she was Auntie I, and they know her as someone with imagination, fun, and joy. She was happy and imaginative, too, with people she helped – for example, leading Christmas carols with the elderly in care homes, in the summer, because they loved them and knew the words!

She was truly loved. Irene may not always have fully realized just how much of a difference she made to others, but her sisters made sure to point this out to her in the past few months.

As the saying goes, Irene « drew the circle wide » in her friendships in Christ, in the community. I would find it interesting to know more about the people whose lives she has touched, so many. You all have your individual memories of this one person, your place in her life and hers in yours; and that is a cord that binds us all together here today as we mourn her passing.

Irene brought faith and energy to all she did; we should all be happy and thankful for her life. But it is a natural, necessary and proper thing to grieve and feel her loss. Irene is in the hands of God, but she is no longer here for us to see and talk with; no longer here to surprise us with ideas. This is an unchangeable event: she *was* with us, and now she is not. For some of you, her absence may be felt so keenly that hope seems to fade. But pray, cry, talk to friends, talk to your priest or pastor.

Indeed, some of you may remember the Gospel story of Christ's grief and tears at the grave of His friend Lazarus. Jesus *wept*. If He wept at the face of death, knowing as he did that death is not the end, then so may we.

Now, the word Gospel means the « *Good News* » of Christ, Son of God, come to bring us, his beloved creatures, into a proper relationship with our loving creator.

Indeed, in our Gospel reading today we heard words that will *help to take us beyond* the time of grief and tears: *Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty ... and a little farther along ...* ³⁹*And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.* John 6:35, 39

This is very hope-filled news – that Jesus, God with us, is the source of *bread and water for our souls* – just as the earth which God made provides bread and water for our bodies. Those who come to Jesus have their heart's hunger satisfied, their soul's thirst quenched.

And Jesus tells us that he is to raise up – to bring to God the Father – *all who are his*. Can we be His? None of us – not me, not you, not Irene – none of us is perfect, and we need

God's help if we are to even try, like God our creator, to put love at the forefront of what we do. So *God came to us*, in his son Jesus, God and man in one, the only human without sin. He did this so that we could learn, could be led, to be more like him. So that he could feed our souls.

Jesus also made, as we heard, this wonderful promise of being raised up at the end of our earthly lives, to be with God. This is the great hope that Christian faith gives to us. Eternal life with God awaits us. *We* cannot add up all the good and bad we do, like an accountant, and know what will happen. We cannot make a deal with God. We must let go of calculations, and just *follow* God's teaching, *be* his disciple, in love and faith, without counting the cost. God will take care of the rest. He loves every one of us and wants us to follow him. He will hold us in his loving hands one day.

So, I wonder if there is a way in which the example that Irene has showed us, in her life and faith, reflects this promise in the Gospel?

Irene's faith in God is something that shone through her, faith with clarity and faith with action in the way she did touch others. Faith – in action – that is a term that really rings true when I think about Irene. Her focus was so often outward-looking. Her years of service for the Food Bank (together with her Mum!), following Jesus' example of feeding the poor; her time given to the CWL and ACW organizations, in church committees and sharing her spirit in innovative ideas (and implementation of those ideas!) for church events, in leading music in church, camp and Sunday school settings.

Few could forget when, during her convalescence from a surgery last year, she played her guitar and led St. Mark's congregation in singing « City of God ». We really felt close to that city in that lovely moment. And that City of God is the image, the vision, of where God leads all those who have come to him, after their earthly journey is done.

During her illness, still caring for others, Irene continued to make memories, and did not focus much on her problems when talking to others. Once the end of her life was near, in palliative care, her sister describes how she seemed to "give herself permission to be sick". She knew a change was coming; I will always remember her telling me, only a couple of

days before she passed away, that she was going home to God. These were her words: “I may not see my house again, but I am going home.” Indeed, now, God is home to her.

Irene, like us, was “only human”, not perfect, but we can see in her a reflection of, *and participation in*, God’s love. The Gospels are holy texts that teach us of God’s work. When people do good work inspired by God, they also become a sort of living lesson for us.

We will also teach others by example, if we participate with God in the kingdom of love. Looking back on Irene’s life with us, now completed, we can see a pattern of giving and putting others first; a pattern that echoes God’s grace, the undeserved gifts he gives to us. Our participation will not be like Irene’s – it will be uniquely ours, just as hers was her very own. But it will make a difference to the world.

Irene has gone into the loving hands of God. We are in grief and we will miss her, now and as years go by. Yet God will be beside each and every one of us, and beside Irene too. Peace will come to you, and God will come to you, Irene’s friends and family.

I know that some of you may not have faith in God, or may not have church or some other place of worship as part of your lives. But for everyone, death has a way of opening our minds and hearts to the questions of our existence – who we are, what is the meaning of life and death? These are big questions for all of us, churchgoers or not.

A holy hope in God’s continuing mercy and care for us, in eternity, is something that we can keep in mind in the weeks and months ahead, in our sorrow.

And now, to our faithful, resourceful, adventurous, spontaneous, active, giving, tireless friend and loved one, Irene: May you rest in peace, and rise with Christ to glory. Amen.