

Sermon: 5 Pentecost
 June 27, 2010
 Fr. Bill McGinty

Title: “The Big Red Doors.”

In today’s first reading, we come to the end of the story of Elijah. Single-handedly he has saved Israel, vanquished his enemies, and returned the people to the Covenant with Yahweh. In today’s lesson, the final journey of Elijah is full of symbolism. Elisha, his disciple, refuses to leave Elijah his master; just as Ruth refused to leave Naomi her mother-in-law. Elijah strikes the waters of the Jordan and they part, just as Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea. Elijah ascends to the heavens in a fiery chariot, while Elisha inherits his mantle and with it the power and authority of Elijah as prophet.

We would all wish for our children to walk in our ways, or at the very least that each of us pass on something of value to the next generation. So it is, between Elijah and Elisha. So it is, with my dear friend Margaret.

In the poorest area of the City of Manchester in England this last week, a 57 year old woman lies dying, surrounded by her loving friends and family. – She probably never weighed more than 105 lbs in her entire life; she never married; never had children, but in the last week a steady stream of local people and old friends came to see her. ---Back in 1974, when we were all still young, we simply called her “young Margaret”. She was bright, funny, full of life, very spiritual and wise beyond her years. Her parents had a large house in the city with a constant swinging door. Through that door any day of the week, any week of the year, came parishioners, friends, local priests, young priests or seminarians from the diocese, some who wanted to strangle their parish priest, students, missionaries and occasionally Salesians, boys or staff from the local Salesian College Shrigley, where Margaret senior was a secretary.

I belonged to several of these groups: I taught history at the College, was still studying for the priesthood, and at least three times a week wanted to strangle, my boss the rector. “Why don’t you take a break and come down for the weekend?” Margaret senior would say to me, any weekend the College students had gone home.

So one weekend, I did. The house was big, the welcome warm, the food was great and we sat around for hours playing the guitar and singing songs long into the night. Day or night, the front door kept opening and people kept arriving, calling in, dropping stuff off. One prayer group or another seemed to occupy the front room. 1516 Manchester Old Road, was very much a clearing house for ministry and just about anyone involved in parish life, the Gospel or God’s work of any kind. I have seen priests there from as far away as South America and even Hong Kong and many other places.

In the midst of all this, where three very active teenage boys, full of energy, music, sport and fun; two hard working and loving parents and then there was young Margaret. She had just graduated as a school teacher, but was one of those rare people who we all seek

out when we want the best of advice. Older than her years, Margaret was the spiritual heart of her family.

As the years went on, her spiritual influence on people's lives grew. In 1976 after the tragic loss of her brother Chris, it was so much of her strength that saw the family through the most difficult of days. She adopted Chris' love of Charismatic renewal, that was sweeping all the churches in the late 1970s and 80s.

I remember her trying to sign me up for a week's Renewal Conference at the local Teacher's Training College. "No! It's not for me," I said. "All that waving your hands in the air; shouting 'alleluia', and 'Praise the Lord, praise the Lord!'; not to mention 'speaking in tongues'! I believe in the Holy Spirit okay, but I like my religion a little more dignified."

"Your problem, Bill McGinty," she told me, while fixing me with her steely eye, "is that you can't get passed the 'big red doors!'"

"What big red doors?" I said, half suspecting that I had swallowed the bait and there was now a story heading my way! ---- There was! So she began:

"There was this guy called Michael, who came into the city by train every day to work. To get to his office, he cut through the back streets and passed the same church each and every day. He was curious about the church, because it was in such a strange place, wedged between offices and warehouses. It had three or four steps that took you in straight off the sidewalk. The church was hard to find, because you had to turn down allies and passages to find it that were so narrow, that the church itself was dwarfed by the buildings around it. But, despite his curiosity Michael never entered the church. The reason was because it had great red doors. He thought them ugly and out of place. They put him off entering. Years went by and he continued to pass the church.

One week, however, after a family loss, he summed up all his courage, went up the steps and through the great red doors. --- What he found on the other side was the most beautiful church he had ever seen. It was Gothic, ornate, carved, but peaceful, tranquil and gave off an ambiance of prayer and holiness. He grew to love the church and spent a little time there every day to pray. He marveled that after all those years passing the church, on the way to work, he had now found a true 'hidden gem'."

"And your point?" I said.

"My point is that you are allowing 'alleluias and 'speaking in tongues' to act like the great red doors in your life! If you could get passed the doors you would open yourself to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to an entirely new prayer experience. You would meet people from many walks of life, who will enrich you, your ministry and you will experience the Holy Spirit and healing in a new way!"

So it began!

It's probably impossible to quantify the number of people this one 'spirit-filled' woman touched with her life. I know that so many of my friends, on the road to priesthood, so many in the Renewal, HCPT groups, were similarly influenced. The Retreat teams she was involved with; the folk music and Renewal music that became such an important part of her life, spoke of a depth of God's spirit working in and through her life. I remember that tomorrow is the 30th Anniversary of my ordination at Shrigley, and that it was Margaret and her friends who provided so much of the wonderful music that day.

She went to China for a while, but chose to spend the last ten years of her life living and working among the poorest of the poor in her beloved city of Manchester. She had no children, but she had many children; and her advice and spirituality is sewn into the fabric of many a priesthood and ministry around the world.

St Paul, in the second reading today, tells us that the 'fruit of the spirit' is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. Young Margaret had all of these, which is why so many people have gathered over the last few weeks to celebrate her life.

Ask my wife Maryann at Coffee hour this morning: "What was the first thing that Fr. Bill did when he came to this church of the Good Shepherd back in 2003? ---and she will tell you 'he painted the front doors of the church bright red!'"

In the Gospel today the man says to Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus says to him:

"Foxes have their holes and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." – To another he says: "Follow me!"

Young Margaret followed Jesus ---- but more, she brought Jesus to others, who needed him. Soon he will welcome her behind some other great red doors, where will wait a host of her old friends.

Let us pray for her in the Eucharist this morning and her dear family. Let us pray that like her, Christ and his Spirit will touch our lives and this little church and bring us the gifts he has promised and the love that comes from seeking his kingdom and striving to continue his work. Let us pray that her work and service to Christ continues to sew the seeds of his word and kingdom for so many.

Amen.+