

FINDING JESUS IN A CEMETERY

Sometimes people ask me why I became a priest. There are all sort of pious answers that you feel you need to give in answer to such a question. When I scrutinise my own motives for joining the Seminary my mind inevitably doesn't go to something necessarily pious but to a place. Of all places it is a cemetery. It is the Box Hill Cemetery.

I come from the Box Hill/Blackburn area. For many years, from Grade 3 to Year 12, I used to work to the school from home by the Box Hill Cemetery. If I was running late I would make a short cut through the Cemetery. It might save up to 5 or 10 minutes. At first I was reluctant to go through a cemetery. It seems a scary thing to do for a young person in primary school. However, as I got older I noted that I was going through the cemetery to and from school regardless of whether I was running late or not.

I do recall that very often on a beautiful day I would often stop in the Cemetery and sit on one of the garden park benches that they have there. I did not know it at the time, but as I now look back I would say that I was praying, and praying quite deeply. I was simply enjoying the peacefulness and "dead calm"(!) of the area.

As you could imagine, walking through the Cemetery over a ten year period I got to know a lot of the names on the tombstones. I also noted that some of them had died at a very early age. You never think, when you are a young person, that you could die. But when I looked at some of the names and dates of birth and death on the tombstones I noted that some had died even younger than I was then. Once again, when I look back on it I do feel that this has had a big effect on my life. It made me realise that life is very short.

Sometimes in upper secondary school when I sat down on the park bench in that Cemetery I do recall participating in the strange mental activity. As I was thinking about what I should do with my life, I do recall asking my "friends" in the tombs what advice they would want to give me.! I do recall asking "*If you could speak to me what would you advise me to do with my life?*" I imagine their answer would be very short and to the point - "*Don't forget you are going to die one day!*"

It was with that sort of answer rumbling through my mind and heart I began to think of the priesthood. Isn't it incredible! Some people are led to the priesthood and other walks of life because they felt God calling them! I felt God calling me to the priesthood via my imagined mutterings of those who had already died and were buried in the Box Hill Cemetery.

I really felt the Lord's hand at work in all this later on in my life when I was in the Seminary. We would often be schooled into the principles of spiritual discernment from the Catholic heritage. One such exercise, coming particularly from the Ignatian Tradition, is that you are to imagine your life before you and that death was imminent. In that experience of the shortness of life you are to ask yourself what are your true priorities in life. When I heard of this I felt I had already done that over many years in a slow and subtle but profound way on my walks to and from school through the Cemetery at Box Hill.

Later in my life I have often returned to the Cemetery at Box Hill. It helps to give me perspective and helps me to realign my priorities.

More recently I have come across a sermon of John Henry Newman which struck me as a good summary of all that I've said above. He said in one of his homilies for us always to remember three things: that life is short; that death is certain; that eternity is long.

What a strange man I am! I have found such wisdom in a Cemetery!