

Address at Evensong Service for Miners who died in the Pike river Disaster

– December 5, 2010

The West Coast of the SI of NZ is a rugged mountainous area, rich with alluvial gold and coal seams. The people match the terrain – rugged, adventurous, individualistic and suspicious of strangers. Many of them have been employed in coal mining since European settlement in the mid 19th century. My Irish ancestors travelled over from Christchurch to seek gold but returned without making their fortune.

The Pike River scheme is a brand new coalmine on the Brunner seam which has the largest deposit of rich high-coking coal in the area. The overburden rock covering this coal is 4 times harder than concrete, so it is expensive to mine.

In the Christian view of things, our God's care of us does not extend suspending the laws of nature to protect us from their effects. Some occupations are inherently dangerous to life and limb. Coalmining is one, having to deal with the flammable methane gas which seeps continually from these seams. It requires a sophisticated system of ventilation for miners to work in this environment at all.

On Nov 19, 2010 there were 29 men at the coalface 600 metres down – 16 miners and 13 contractors, when an explosion occurred which cut the miners off from the main shaft. The blast injured two other miners in the main shaft but were able to walk to safety. A borehole was immediately started to reach the area to test for toxic gases before the rescue team went in. It was 95% drilled when a second much larger explosion occurred on Nov 24 at which point it was announced that there was no chance of any of the men being still alive. Further explosions on Nov 26 and 28 revealed fires raging in the mine, casting doubt on any recovery of bodies.

In times of great tragedy we Christians are driven back to the bedrock truths of our faith, the overarching care of God for our world and the people who live in it, and in particular the Resurrection of Christ from the dead, carrying with it the promise of our sharing in this Risen life. Our readings this afternoon help us recall these truths. The Book of Wisdom is an early indication that God's view of human disasters is so different from ours. "Their going seemed like a disaster, their leaving us like annihilation, but they are at peace :their hope was rich with immortality"

The Pike River men knew that every day they went into the mine could be their last because it was dangerous work. They did it for their livelihood, for their families. They were ready to lay down their lives for their families to do this work.

The buried miners have been given a mass Remembrance farewell by 10,000 people at the Omoto Racecourse in NZ near the mineshaft. Our remembering them here in Dublin on the other side of the world shows solidarity and sensitivity to suffering. Many families will carry this sorrow through Christmas, and for years to come. My youngest brother is one of the grieving; Ged O'Connell is Secretary of the EPMU Union that 11 of the miners belonged to, and he spent the whole week at the minehead. He was distressed at the world wide media who arrived expecting a Chile-like rescue scenario.

Coal mine disasters are regrettably commonplace in our world driven by the need for quick returns. In one week in April this year there were 4 separate coal mine accidents involving loss of life in mainland China.

All we can do is salute the courage of these men who go underground amidst toxic gases, and hellishly noisy machinery to bring this precious fuel to the surface. We pray for their spouses and children and friends who will most likely have just a photograph to remind them.

When Jesus rose from the dead the searchers could find no body. The empty tomb was a sign that he had risen. Perhaps the pain of having no body to bury will remind the bereaved forcibly of the promise of our own Resurrection when Christ 'will raise our mortal bodies and make them like his own in glory.'

I join the other NZers here in thanking you all for your presence to honour our buried miners, and for your prayers for them and their families today.

Brian O'Connell sm