

Homily for the Funeral Mass of Professor Watanabe Shoichi

At the Church of St Ignatius, Sei Maria Seido, 10.30 am, April 19, 2017

Preached by Fr Peter Milward SJ

When we heard the news of Professor Watanabe's death from heart failure last Monday, we were filled with amazement as well as grief at the passing of so famous a man.

Yes, he was indeed famous in Japan, as well as great in himself, even or especially in his country origin in distant Tsuruoka, in the prefecture of Yamagata, even a countryman like William Shakespeare and Jesus of Nazareth, even what is called a country bumpkin. Then he entered Sophia University, better known in Japan as Jochi Daigaku, at a time when anyone applying for entrance was willingly accepted, as contrasted with today. And then after a further degree at Munster in Germany, he became a teacher in the department of English Literature, as my respected colleague, as well as chairman. There his speciality was Old English, centuries before the age of Shakespeare, and many of his good students went on, through my introduction, to study at Campion Hall, Oxford. But he didn't confine his interests to English, or to Sophia University, but it was chiefly as a social critic (or *hyoronka*) that he became so famous in Japan, as what is called VIP, with so many books and articles, with a strong conservative and traditional tendency. But not only that. What I would rather emphasize on this occasion of his funeral, is that he was also a devout Catholic, a follower of Jesus Christ, whom we believe to be the incarnate Word of God, and as such he was not only VIP but also what I would call VUP, a Very Unimportant Person. After all, as we believe, Jesus Christ has come to call not the powerful or wise of this world, but the weak and even the foolish, and so he says, in today's Gospel, "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest", and again, "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart." It is precisely for very ordinary people, for very insignificant people, for very unimportant people, like you and me, that he has come to embrace and assist us here on earth and to welcome us there in the kingdom of heaven. What he wishes to show each and all of us is his divine Love. Accordingly, we have no need of any feeling of sorrow at Professor Watanabe's departure, but rather joy that he has passed to what Shakespeare calls "a better life past fearing death". And especially this holy season of Easter I may add, "Amen" and "Alleluia".