

JIM HIGGINS

I first heard about Jim's condition in late November 2018. I'd been at the cathedral about a year and a half. I knew Jim was an usher here and that he had many close friends in this community. At that time he was in the hospital, very sick. I was anxious to see him, but I was in New York that week for a combination of business and pleasure. When I flew home, I got straight into my car at the airport and drove to the hospital to see Jim and his family. I anointed him with the church's sacrament of the sick. I started to leave, explaining that I had just got back from a trip, and thinking Jim was too tired for anything else. But that was not the case. "Where'd you go?" Jim asked. "New York." "What were you doing there?" "I gave a talk at a monastery and I saw an opera at the Met." "Which opera?" And so on. It seemed there was no such thing as a short conversation with Jim. He had a genuine interest in opera, which I run into but not that often, and of course there was baseball, and family, and faith and on and on. Jim will be remembered for his wide-ranging interests, his engaging personality, sense of humor, service to others, his care for the less fortunate, hard work at accounting, his friendly conversation, and love for the arts. Whenever we watch people we love fade away, the illness may distract us from the person. But Jim was bigger than his illness. The shadow he cast was not of loss, but a shadow of life.

When St. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he had already endured illness, betrayal, torment and hardship in his life. He shared the message of hope he had learned. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Paul asked. He explained, God "did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, will he not also give us everything else along with him?" No anguish, distress, persecution, or peril can separate us from the love of Christ. Neither can death.

Even before the coming of Christ, the Book of Wisdom held the belief that something endured beyond death. It considered the sad situation of good people who suffer unfairly. When they die, Wisdom says, their souls "are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead.... But they are peace." Sometimes when we suffer, we wonder if God is punishing us. But Wisdom says God puts people on trial and judges those who are just as worthy of himself. They are like gold purified in the furnace.

Jesus himself stirred out hope in salvation through his Beatitudes. The very first one promises the kingdom of heaven to those who are poor in spirit. Those who are merciful will be shown mercy. Those who mourn will be comforted. We need those words today.

We could see Jim's death coming from a long way off, but that didn't make it easier. He showed us in just a few decades how rich life can be. Now we pray that Christ will show him how rich eternal life can be. If we share Jim's love of God and neighbor, his work ethic, and his fascination with all the world holds, we will honor his memory. And we stir up our hope that God will find us like purified gold when we reach the ninth inning of life. If we follow what Jesus taught, we strengthen our hope that nothing will ever separate us from his love.