

Homily preached at the Funeral Mass held at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue on Saturday, October 12, 2019, at 10:30 a.m. by

the Reverend Canon Carl Turner, Rector

Jo Brans was born and bred in Mississippi. There must be something wonderful about Mississippi - like another former devoted parishioner who was born there, Libby Clark, who died two years ago, the character of her life can be summed up in one small word – Joy!

I met Jo and Willem in their apartment in the early months of my arrival here; we had a lovely time together with some of their friends Jane and Peter, and Charlotte, and, of course, a certain cat that she doted on. From that moment until the last time I took her Holy Communion in the nursing home, her life like her face was radiant with joy. How appropriate, Willem, that you have filled the church with flowers of many colors – the kaleidoscope of which are a fitting tribute to the many memories of her life.

Educated in Mississippi and Texas, it is quite clear that literature was always going to be an important part of her life; after her family, probably the most significant part. For 15 years she taught in the Department of English at Southern Methodist University in Dallas with many of her academic articles re-printed in more than 20 literary anthologies. She participated in University Exchange programs with Oxford University in the United Kingdom and, in 1982, was named an "Outstanding Professor" by the student body.

Perhaps she is still best known for the monthly column she wrote for *'D' Magazine* published in Dallas – I say "still" best known because I was surprised to be sent various articles she had written by parishioners who still enjoy reading them. Witty, well-researched, hopeful, they are little masterpieces of her craft. Her move to New York with Willem in 1984 allowed her the luxury that she had often dreamed about, of being a full-time writer and, with the help of her agent, Molly Friedrich, she published four

Her knowledge of literature was profound, and I was astonished to hear a recording made five years ago by her son, Wink, as she recited Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 from memory. That sonnet contains the exquisite line, "*Haply I think on thee—and then my state, Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate.*"

There is a great irony that, as her mind became more clouded in older age, she remembered that Sonnet where the poet agonizes on his melancholy which is, ultimately, relieved by the knowledge of the love of someone precious.

She had many precious people in her life; Willem, Winton, Erin, Bailey, Zane, Kim, Carlie, Sara Jo, Samantha – you were that love that she talked about the day she recited Sonnet 29 from memory. She saw the best in so many people and she shared that love with many; how many times did I see that beaming smile of hers even though I knew that she was frail or feeling weak, or in pain. For the past few years of her life, as Willem reminded me, her favorite phrase was "I love you!"

For many years she was a very active member of the Episcopal Church here in New York; first at All Saints on 60th Street where she chaired the committee that arranged all the church's hospitality, was a lector and a member of the Altar Guild. As a member of Saint Thomas, she and Willem co-chaired the Annual Appeal (then known as the 'Every Member Canvas') for two years; she co-chaired an extraordinary event that is still talked about – 'Loaves and Fishes' - and she was a member of the welcome committee, served at coffee hour, and was a regular volunteer for our Saturday Soup Kitchen whose volunteers are right now feeding the homeless near our Church.

She once wrote an article on aging and recalled a description of seniors in a poem by Philip Larkin, titled "*The Old Fools:*"

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms

Inside your head, and people in them, acting.

People you know, yet can't quite name. Each looms

Like a deep loss restored...

...That is where they live:

Not here and now, but where all happened once.

Poignantly, she mentioned the fact that there seemed to be more 'lighted rooms' in her own head. She went on to say, "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be, and that will be remembering."

Dementia is a cruel thing and most cruel to those watching the one they love slip away from them. I never had the privilege of knowing the Jo who was publishing books, but I had glimpses of her remembrances – little flashbacks and moments of clarity that would suddenly take your breath away. Like the time she was attending a senior's lunch here and we had someone playing the piano with great gusto and singing songs from Broadway shows. Suddenly she was on her feet and several started to move quickly in case she fell only to stop in wonder as she joined in the song, singing at the top of her voice and raising her head and her hands as if she was on the stage at Carnegie Hall. It was a beautiful moment.

As she approached her 50th birthday she wrote this:

"There's only one question remaining. What kind of old lady shall I be? From my observations, I have concluded that a successful old age depends on obeying three cardinal rules: Be daring. Be loving. Be tough.

I hope I will be shocking. Not that I am setting out to shock, that dullest of all approaches to life, which I think I've outgrown. But in a good old age, things that lift the heart matter more than face-lifts, tummy tucks or designer derrières. I'd have a face-lift, sure, if I had the money and the interest. Why not? But nothing makes the spirit soar like doing things just because you damn well want to!

I do have a few fairly modest shockers in me, however. In a few years, when someone blows a car horn behind me to rush me through an intersection, I'm going to stop the car, cut off the motor, get out, pad around to his window in my tennis shoes and quaver, "Oh, Sonny, were you trying to tell me something?"

In my dotage, unlike Aunt Eva, I'm going to dote on myself: write a Harlequin romance, refinish all my furniture, execute The Unicorn in Captivity in cross-stitch, bicycle across Europe with a troop of Boy Scouts, begin a foundation for leprosy virgins as Dame Edith Sitwell did, take up professional ballet, marry an 18-year-old as Maude did in Harold and Maude. I'm going to take chances."

Of course, she may well have done all those things in those 'lighted rooms' in her mind that she once predicted, but we will never know.

The prophet Isaiah described a person's life as a beautiful tapestry or carpet. As it is carefully made and grows larger, it has to be rolled up on the loom. As time goes on, the pattern is not only hidden but also forgotten. It is not until the carpet is finished that it is cut off from the loom and then, and only then, can it be unrolled, and the pattern seen in its entirety, including all its flaws as well as its beauty. Perhaps in recent years, more and more of Jo's life has been hidden – the memories rolled up tightly and hidden from view. She said, herself, to you Willem, Wink, Erin, to the grandchildren – to her dear and beloved friends, "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be, and that will be remembering."

And for many in the world, that will be seen as a sad statement for she was not able to remember as she once did. But for us, her Christian brothers and sisters, we know that this death is not the end and that it is a rite of passage – a movement – a journey to something better. For us, her friends and family, we now believe that instead of 'lighted rooms' in her mind she is now welcomed into a place where Jesus promised there would be many rooms in his Father's house.

Today we can rejoice that her mind is no longer clouded and she has nothing to fear for, as Jesus takes her by the hand, the best is yet to be for she will be remembering and telling her story to him in the joy of his presence.

Willem, let me end with a scripture that I think sums up, for me, what we are celebrating here today in faith. From Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:11-13)

And of course, you know how that passage ends, words that Jo lived out in her life: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”