

Good deeds are always rewarded

Recently, I celebrated the funeral Mass of my last remaining aunt. Bridie was ninety years old and had spent the last two years of her life in a nursing home where she suffered from dementia. Part of my ritual during vacations from serving in Mississippi was to visit her in her home. There I could sit and marvel as she opened a treasure chest of stories and experiences from a simple life lived with profound richness.

Bridie married my uncle, Denis, in 1950. The marriage was arranged by a neighbour who used his matchmaking skills before the advent of dating apps. The good Lord must have approved of the match because the marriage lasted until his death in 2000. They were never blessed with a family but, in reality, the community in which they lived, became their family.

Back in 2003, I sat in my office at OLG rectory just after 6.a.m. as I listened to a local Irish radio on the internet. A conversation between the program presenter and a woman who called in the radio station were conversing. As I listened, I said to myself, "I recognize that woman's voice." I did. It was my aunt, Bridie. The topic of discussion was about experiences of hardships during the Second World War. It was a time of rationing where people were only allowed to purchase small amounts of commodities that were in short supply, especially tea.

I reminded her of the incident the next time I met her during my vacation. She filled in more details about her family experience during that time and then told me a true story of how goodness and hospitality will never be forgotten. In the dark days during that war, a young travelling blacksmith knocked on her family door one day. He introduced himself and asked, "Is there anywhere I can stay for a night as I look for work in the area?" The owner said, "I don't know any place right now, but if you want to, you can stay with us for a night or two."

The wandering blacksmith accepted the generous offer. He didn't just stay for a "night or two," he stayed for two years. As the demand to practice his craft became less and less; he decided to travel to Northern Ireland – part of the British territory. There he felt, he might have a better chance to find more work.

That Christmas, still feeling the effects of rationing, Bridie's family received a small parcel delivered by the mail person. He said that he was sure they would enjoy this gift this Christmas. The family noticed the package was mailed in Northern Ireland. The travelling blacksmith hadn't forgotten their hospitality. When they opened the parcel, they found a gift they would treasure – tea.

Fast forward to Bridie's wake. As I sat there, greeting and watching the constant stream of people who had come to pay their respects to Bridie and to support her cousins, I was amazed at the procession of young and old who had come. I realized they were all members of her adopted and extended family.

One gentleman, recognized my priestly attire, and asked me, "Can you point out Bridie's cousin, Richard, to me? I pointed out her cousin to him. Being curious, I asked him his name and where he had come from. He introduced himself and indicated that he had travelled over 60 miles to come to Bridie's wake. How ironic! How fitting!

The next afternoon at the funeral Mass, I looked down the church to get a sense of the number of persons who came to the Mass. Then, I noticed him, with his family, sitting about halfway down the church on the left side. Who was this stranger who travelled so far to Bridie's funeral? He was the son of that wandering blacksmith.

Goodness never becomes outdated. Hospitality is always rewarded. Simple gestures of welcome are always appreciated. Angels unaware are all around us. When we recognize them, we are empowered. When they surprise us, we are humbled. When we experience them, they become intergenerational.

The incident reminded me of that famous quote from Maya Angelou "People will forget what you said, forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."