“he who listens to my word and believes in the one who sent me has life in him”

Today is a day that the Archbishop could only have dreamed of. The principle work of the SMA is to preach the Word in Africa, found a local church and move on. Here with us we have priests from the indigenous church in India, Liberia, Benin joining with the priests of Europe in celebrating Mass for the Archbishop. All of whom continue the Mission of speaking the “word of life”.

It is strange how a simple phrase or question can stop you “in your tracks” and make you think. Yesterday at Dutton Manor, where we were so warmly welcomed, one of the ladies asked me why only this gentleman had been buried there. I had to stop for a moment and then I replied that the SMA Superior at the time, Fr. Walsh, had been very fond of the Archbishop. This had been our house of studies preparing young men for the missionary priesthood and I suspect that the grave was to be an icon for those young men. As they prepared for their own mission, there before them was a man who had “run the race to the end” – a hero and an icon - a legend before their eyes.

As with all heroes legends soon spring up and apocryphal stories abound. One such among us about the Archbishop was the tale of him working on the farm near Liverpool and of his hearing the Angelus bell ringing out morning, noon and evening, which drew him to inquire about the Church and from their finding his vocation.

There is no great proof of the tale but we do know that he was born into a family of practising Anglicans and it was in that familial setting that he first heard “the Word of Life.” Later when fostered with his uncle and aunt, he was introduced to Catholicism by Mrs Johnson nee Rainford.

From there what he describes as his mysterious and wonderful vocation unfolded. Mysterious indeed it may well have been. Orphaned, he had to leave school at the age of 13, and while waiting for a call to seminary he set about educating himself.

The call drew him to the newly established SMA Province in Ireland and the mystery led him in 1913 to the wilds of Ireland. He wrote that when he saw the approach of Cork harbour he thought he was in heaven. He had embarked on an adventure of courage and trust.

Ordained in 1918 his first appointment was as a teacher in the Cork seminary. In his first year there he was called by the Superior and while he had thought that he was “in trouble”, he was offered a choice of missions in Africa and given 2 days to decide. He wrote that his decision was to trust in the Lord and his superiors. He was again appointed to the seminary. But a year later he was sent back to his great adventure which took him from Lancashire to Cork then to Nigeria and Ghana and finally back to Lancashire.

To listen to the Word and accept, is to have life breathed into you.

Life begets Life.

This was his task. - His “Faith Life” was to convert souls for God; oppose wrong teaching; breathe life to others through his preaching, education; medicine and right living. Schools; hospitals bear his name in Ghana and countless churches bear the inscription “this stone was laid by chief … and blessed by Archbishop William Porter”.

His achievements were monumental but were always undertaken with a humble gentleness, witnessed by the pectoral cross we placed on his coffin. A bishop of his era would have an elaborate, valuable cross to signify his high office. For William Porter it was a simple brass cross adorned with less than precious stones.

Life in Christ mirrors the Trinity itself - Giving, Receiving and Returning both love and life.

We all listen to the “Word” indeed we commune with the “Word” in the Eucharist as did the Archbishop so often in his ministry.

Let’s simply and humbly ask for Grace enough to follow in the Archbishop’s footsteps - in adventure; courage and faith – so as to give and share the Life that we have all received in Christ.

“he who listens to my word and believes in the one who sent me has life in him”

(Given on the re-internment of Archbishop Porter 11th June 2013 at Wardley.)