

A Tribute to Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr.

Father Reese's Homily:

Just a few days ago, you were together as a family, doing all the things that a family does. No one could have dreamed how your lives would change last Thursday. No one could have foreseen the accident. Now, here we gather to commemorate Roy, your husband, your father, your grandfather, your brother, and your friend. We pause to thank God for the life he has shared and the love he has given, especially to you who have been closest to him.

Whenever something like this happens, people ask, "Why?" No one I know can answer that question adequately. It may be that there is no answer. It's part of the risk we all take by simply living. None of us are guaranteed to live to any particular age. Life is indeed perilous and full of unknowns.



There is a prayer that has in it this phrase: "We know not what a day may bring forth, but only that the hour for serving you, Lord, is always present." The future is always an unknown quantity. We never know what may come our way.

But in the midst of all this uncertainty, the Christian faith makes a whole lot of sense. It is exactly for this fragile, precarious, and uncertain life, that God gives us a message of assurance. He seems to know just what we need.

So into our unpredictable existence, he offers a word of promise. In today's Gospel from John, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." In other words, "Don't worry, don't be upset." I can't help thinking of Roy there at home. Did he ever say that to you? "Don't be worried, don't be upset."

Jesus said those words. He said them for the benefit of all of us who are often worried and upset. He said them for people like us who might slam doors when we're angry or let the rest of the world know how we feel with words or with body language.

For our uncertainty, Jesus also offers a word of hope. He said, "In my Father's house are many rooms. I'm going to prepare a place for you." He's talking about our next destination — heaven.

Every parent can identify with Jesus' reference to getting a place ready. When a baby is on the way, you spend a lot of time getting things ready. You begin to gather those baby things — a crib, a stroller, diapers, those cute little outfits; and you start to sort out the shower gifts. You get it all ready so it's there when it's needed.

Sometimes you have to "take the place with you." Those of you who have children know what it was like when you had to go somewhere with the baby.

You loaded up the car, and the whole back seat was filled with baby things — just for a short visit! All of this was part of preparing a place. You wanted your baby to have a place to rest and be comfortable among familiar things.

That makes me think of Jesus' words, "I go to prepare a place for you."

When Jesus talks about preparing a place, he is talking about heaven. He is saying that this place on earth is not ours forever. We are here only for a little while. The place he speaks of is a place where there will be no more pain, no more crying, no more sorrow, no more funeral homes or hospitals, for all of those things will have passed away.

We get used to this home and take it for granted. We often assume that we have all the time in the world, but that's not true. You and I are called to be ready ourselves — ready to go and to be with the Lord. Sometimes we have the chance to get ready, but for some of us, there will be no advance notice.

The important thing, though, is that there is a place; and, if Jesus has prepared it, you can be sure that it will be beautiful and furnished with all that we need. Roy is there. He is with the Lord. You and Roy have shared that same faith, the faith that says we are citizens of heaven. That is the one reason why a Christian funeral is different.

There is hope. There is comfort. There is faith. There is a heaven. And there will be a reunion. Roy is enjoying one right now with his parents. In fact, Roy and his father are doing just fine right now, having discovered that God takes in both Democrats AND Republicans.

To answer our questions, though, Jesus offers us a word of promise. He tells us how to get to the place he has prepared. Thomas the disciple asked about it. This is the same man who wanted to see proof that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Jesus



made it quite plain. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." No one else can make that kind of a promise. He invites you and me to trust him completely.

Today we thank God for Roy and his faith, a faith I had the honor of witnessing these past five years. It was just a few weeks ago when the Admiral preached the Independence Day sermon from that lectern, honoring the St. Andrew's parishioners who were veterans of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. Roy was pleased as we dedicated the two plaques listing those veterans on that Fourth of July. We give thanks for all that he has meant to this family, to Jane, to the children, to the grandchildren, and to his friends. Yes, you who have lived with him know who he is and what he has done.



Roy had many names: LeRoy, Mr. Collins, Admiral Collins and, within the family, Dad and Duna and Roy. But the one name that snapped everyone to attention, including Roy himself, was "Oh Roy." That was used by the real commanders of the Collins household, Roy's mother and his wife, Jane.

Trips to the family beach house on Dog Island might result in quite a few names for Roy: The grandchildren asking Duna when they would get there, the marina hands saying, "Hi Admiral, your boat is ready." But, of course, that required that the family arrived on time and that the marina hands hadn't gone home yet. Then, when the boat wouldn't start, there would be an "Oh Roy!" This would often be followed by several renditions of the family song: "Daddy can fix it." Then, often with several hours of screwdrivers, pliers, and hammers, he would do just that.



Yes, Dad, Duna, and Roy were his family names. And whether planning a grandiose tree house with the grandchildren, discussing college choices, debating whether or not to join the Marine Corps, or talking about any other

family matter, it guaranteed his full attention and concern.

Roy was born to a position of privilege. But he knew well the scripture that says, "Those to whom much has been given, much is expected." Roy never rested on his family name.

We all know of his many accomplishments in the military (as General Gay has described so well), along with his success in the business world and the civic arena.

These past several years he was an ardent advocate for our military veterans. And Roy walked the talk on his support of veterans. It's hard to remember a holiday weekend other than Christmas that Roy and Jane didn't hop in their car to go to a Veterans Nursing Home somewhere in the state, or to a military cemetery, where Roy would be a speaker. The rest of us might be on the golf course or at the beach while Roy and Jane spent their holidays speaking of their thanks for veterans and their families.

Roy always took care of body, mind, and soul. He exercised vigorously, enjoying swimming, cycling, and rowing, among other things. But it was Roy's faith and support of the church that most impressed me. When I was first called to this parish here over five years ago, Roy (and Jane) graciously offered their guest cottage out back for me to live in while I secured some housing for my family. And this was to a fellow that he had met exactly once. (I think it may have helped that he knew I was an Army veteran.)

During those couple of months when I was living there alone, Roy and Jane would invite me into their home for meals and regale me with tales of Tampa, the Navy, St. Andrew's, and their faith. Roy has done much for his church over the years. He helped spearhead the effort that brought us the lovely organ you hear being played today. (In fact, he liked to sneak in on occasion and play the organ himself.) He co-chaired our recent capital campaign that successfully refurbished our church and facilities. He served on the vestry, our church board, several times. And he also enjoyed tickling the ivories on the piano in the parish hall.



His strong faith showed forth in the way that he conducted his life. Roy treated everyone with dignity, honor, and respect. I daresay that everyone here was proud to know LeRoy Collins.

So don't be worried or upset – as Jesus assures us, "There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you." Roy is enjoying his new room right now. And, eventually, we'll be joining him there, too.

Well done, good and faithful servant. Till we meet again . . .