

Sunday 16 Apr, 2023 | By Hunter Wells hunter@thesun.co.nz

The day God gave Adam Kirkeby a hug



Father Adam Kirkeby, the pianist of sorts. Photo John Borren.

The Weekend Sun's Hunter Wells, a crotchety old southern Presbyterian, continues his privileged encounter with Father Adam Kirkeby and retreads the man's path of faith into the Catholic priesthood. In this second and final instalment, there is the calling, the agonising on the pillow at night, the 'shall I?' the 'shan't I?' and the Priest's ultimate joy and peace.

There was no epiphany, no lightning bolt; no sudden realisation. Adam Kirkeby's decision to become a priest evolved over many

years. It began as a very young boy – play-acting a priest using soft toys as a congregation.

“I just love the faith and I wanted to serve God and his people. I love helping people. It’s extremely fulfilling.”

He was ready to join the seminary when he left school but was told to go and get some life experience.

He did – was a teacher for six years and did a BA. Then aged 31, he entered the seminary and emerged an ordained priest just last year after six-and-half-years of study.

“Apart from the academia, you dig deep into yourself, you come to know yourself.”

We are, he tells me, very poor judges of ourselves.

“We see ourselves from a completely different perspective. The best people to tell us about ourselves are other people.”

The wisdom there, perhaps, is don’t ask and avoid disappointment. But if you don’t ask you won’t learn.

One of the great Christian festivals has just come and gone – and he loved it.

“Easter still has great relevance. A big, wonderful, joyous celebration.”

But for many of us, perhaps, Easter is a four-day weekend – bach, beach and beers.

“I certainly agree a lot of people have passed Christianity off in recent years.”

But it doesn’t mean we are a faithless lot.

Impossible to be faithless

“It’s impossible to be faithless. Some may not practise religion, but come a crisis and they’ll suddenly be talking about the afterlife. They may say they’re atheists, but then talk about loved ones being in heaven.”

Faith, according to Father Kirkeby, is an innate thing.

“Everyone will come to know the existence of God.”

And, he assures me, that even amid the great challenges of life, amid great suffering, there will be great consolation, great peace and great joy.

“It’s a deep happiness.”

Isn't every day full of challenges for a priest? Desperate people, sad people, broken people, dying people, pouring out life's crises?

"It is a privilege to be with people at pivotal times. I am so grateful they trust me when they are vulnerable."

And he especially cherishes being with people at the moment of dying.

"I held my Nana's hand as she was dying, told her I loved her, I thanked her for everything she had done for me in life. And as I was driving home the sun's rays were beaming down and it felt heaven and earth were so close. God was right there, hugging me, giving me strength."

It was, he says, one of the most beautiful things.

Supportive family

Father Adam's mother was totally supportive of him becoming a priest, as was his "not-so-Catholic father" and his siblings. They've even been at the Parish of St Thomas of Aquinas on match day, for his Sunday mass.

"It's nice, we are all very close."

And if he messed up, he's certain he would hear about it.



Father Adam Kirkeby the priest. Photo John Borren.

Now, when he takes off the dog collar after he's finished God's work for the day, what makes Adam Kirkeby's tail wag?

What does a priest read on the pillow at night? 'Lives of the Saints' by Father Alban Butler. Now a four-volume set and the fruit of 30 years' research and work into the lives of 2565 saints and Christians.

"You will be thinking I am some kind of weirdo. Can't he do anything normal?"

Quite normal Father – after all, it's apparently the most well-known and well-loved Catholic book after the Bible.

Human

Favourite junk food?

"Chocolate. I like a burger, nice at the time but you feel sick after it. And Italian and a roast."

Music?

"Adele, Celine Dion, Harry Underwood and Enya."

National or Labour? He won't be drawn into politics. But it's wine over beer.

He ponders blondes or brunettes?

"I'm committed to all God's people, not just some or other. That doesn't mean I am not human."

And in receiving a gift, the most important thing is a meaningful heart behind the giving. He puts a sentimental value ahead of monetary value.

"Although money can be useful."

Thank you for taking the time Father – an uplifting and rewarding encounter.