

# PREACHING AT THE FUNERAL A VERY PERSONAL APPROACH

## A FEW THOUGHTS AND A HANDFUL OF SERMONS

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*Here are eight funeral addresses hoping to honour eight very different people and eight differently shaped families. Some are from a short crematorium service, where what might often be referred to as "Eulogy" has to be interwoven with what we churchy types want to call a "Sermon." There is a virtue in this as we are compelled by brevity to show their individual story woven in with the grand biblical story. Sometimes, in a church setting, there is plenty of time, and someone else might have told the life-story, freeing us for theological reflection. A welcome or a sermon in a church building has a different tone to one in a secular space. We should try to imagine how differently they are heard. I have included some introductions with Bible sentences to show what they can provoke and evoke, and also some prayers, as they, too, can often do a good deal of work. Sometimes a brief allusion or reference at the committal can be rich and reassuring.*

*I always hope to banish euphemism, to articulate feeling, reading the Bible and the deceased person's life with some degree of emotional intelligence. We should find the good news in their life, highlighted by the scriptures, then the job is to keep out of God's way and let God and his people meet.*

*My wordiness may appal. You may well think I am indeed in the way. You may have very different theological assumptions about what is going on in life, in death, in heaven. I do not wish to impose. I don't claim any authority. But I'd rather risk criticism and offer from my clumsy efforts a linguistic spectrum which may add a few shades to your already developed vocabulary of grief and hope. I want to celebrate with you the glorious spectrum of Scripture: some evocative, some explanatory, some expressive of feeling,*

*some stories, some poems, some wise advice, all of which can work for us in different ways. Feel free to plunder any phrase or idea that you can re-work and make your own. I'm sure, if there's anything half-decent here, I've pinched it from Alan Bennett or someone. Equally, feel free to shred because you already do it more subtly and concisely than I.*

*The words we choose and the tone with which we speak them, are probably equally significant. The very fact that we have taken the trouble to choose them carefully is disproportionately appreciated by many families who have a worryingly low expectation of what a church funeral might offer. People will hear our judgement or kindness, our defensiveness or generosity, our self-justification or our affirmation. The secret prayer with which we prepare, and the private prayer of crumpled relief with which we end are, then, perhaps the most important words of all. Thank God he can work through our weakness as well as our gifts. God bless this crucial part of your Reader ministry.*

## A Church member with Dementia

*Sometimes I choose Psalm 139 to help us accept that, though we feel we cannot reach inside the beloved with dementia, at least God knows them thoroughly. On this occasion, being someone we knew well, I found passages that evoked her character from earlier in her life came to mind. They allowed us to honour her part in the heritage of our church and community.*

*As we arrive:*

N, we welcome you to church for the last time, confident in God who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead.

### INTRODUCTION

St Paul says: "I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the means of faith that God has assigned." (Romans 12:3)

We gather to give thanks for the faith God assigned N and the good judgement, humility and firmness of purpose which she showed among us. We honour her loyalty and love, her parenthood and especially her long, friendship and beautifully balanced marriage with Don.

We come to mourn N's illness, hurt and puzzled maybe about the apparent fading of personality; to grieve at her death, yet maybe also to give thanks for its timely peace.

We come to consider the future as best we can, shaping a new pattern of life without Noreen among us. Perhaps you share the faith that she and D have lived by, and are thinking of heaven, where Noreen finds peace with our creator. Perhaps you admire but cannot share it. Perhaps you are sceptical. All are welcome here at a Church which people like N and D make hospitable. We gather, united in our care for them.

A Prayer for any who wish to pray:

God our creator,  
We gather, vulnerable in the face of death:  
So silent,  
So uncompromising,  
So common and yet so awesome.  
We pray that you will draw near to receive our thanks for N's life and feel our sorrow at her death.  
Take our honest memory and turn it into wisdom,  
so strengthening us for all that lies ahead.  
We pray through Jesus Christ who died and rose again to show us the path to heaven.  
Amen.

READING from the book of Proverbs

Keep your heart with all vigilance,  
for from it flow the springs of life.  
Put away from you crooked speech,  
and put devious talk far from you.  
Let your eyes look directly forwards,  
and your gaze be straight before you.  
Keep straight the path of your feet,  
and all your ways will be sure.  
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;  
turn your foot away from evil.

My child, be attentive to my wisdom;  
incline your ear to my understanding,  
so that you may hold on to prudence,  
and your lips may guard knowledge.

## ADDRESS

The understated emotion and dignity of the Elgar which opened our service, with its controlled passion, evokes something of N.

Not demonstrative, but full of feeling, N enjoyed a sense of organisation, a certain control, an administrative demeanour. The word administration, of course, includes the word Ministry. Her skills were put to work for the benefit of others. In the office of D W S and Co, she applied her forensic abilities to the paperwork, so employees and apprentices and not least her Husband could crack on with the creative work and training. (Indeed, their first apprentice is here today.) Be it helping arrange the Tennis Club fireworks do, or in family Sunday-Roast-closeness; be it organising a holiday cottage for a few couples or families, while others may be the centre of the party and the laughter, N provided the discreet backbone of organisation.

High standards, yet quiet affection; integrity and purposefulness; tireless walking; prudence, sober judgement. You can see why the words from Romans and from Proverbs rang true. N teaches us something of what they mean. She shows us that such qualities are far from dull, but can be liberating, giving security in which others can flourish and have fun.

Nowhere was her balance of organisation and generosity of spirit, channelling her desire for some control in order to set others free, high standards, yet for fullness of living more important than in parenthood. Again, discreet in her feeling, she was proud of M and J, and that pride grew and grew with each grandchild's arrival. When N seemed far away in the mysterious realm of dementia, as she continued watching television apparently impassively, still an arm would protectively rise to hold J, her latest great grandchild, on her knee.

In the huge warmth of feeling, condolence, support and neighbourly care that D wishes to thank you all for, we do see reflected back something of their warmth, neighbourly care, community organisation and loyal affection that has benefitted so many here at All Saints, the Company, the Woodlands Bowling Club and elsewhere. It's the sort of organisation that sets friendship free. That Camp Hill School friends are here is a glimpse of the longstanding

local loyalties they evoke from the people around them. The S family have reaped what they have sown in their community life.

It's wonderful to think of their life together going back to that most effective dating agency, Colmore Infants School. Apart only from D's national service, they have travelled together with beautiful balance and good natured Jack-Sprat complementarity.

By the time I arrived three years ago, N had stopped speaking. At 8am Communion she offered a smile that was at once both quizzical and appealing. There was an innocence as she looked up expectantly to receive the host. She accepted the gentle guidance to and fro with a quietness that was all the more poignant because she was so used to being the one who organised, controlled facilitated. Indeed, in retrospect, worries D knows she kept to herself for some time were triggered by small errors she noticed in that most excellent tidy mind. Again, her silence is all the more upsetting when we think of the integrity in speech. N was one who "put all crooked speech or devious talk away from her."

We should feel free to bring our bewilderment and hurt and frustration about such a cruel illness to God without embarrassment or politeness. Long before God came in Christ to reveal his closeness to us in all our friendship and our confusion; long before Christ's death and resurrection would show us a clear path to heaven, a Bible poet wrote the psalm we recited earlier.<sup>1</sup> There is a solitary soul wondering at God's intimate knowledge of his heart and mind, his speech and movement. "God knows [him] altogether." There is nowhere God cannot reach him. There is nowhere God could not reach and know and love N. Even as she seemed out of reach, and now is very much beyond our reach, God holds her. His right hand leads her. Even through the sea of death, God's right hand holds her fast.

One other thing to be said about N's illness is what it drew from those around her. This is not to justify or romanticise the tragedy of dementia. But we cannot pass today without giving thanks for the extraordinary, unembarrassed

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<sup>1</sup> Verses from Psalm 139 were recited by the congregation: O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from afar. You mark out my journeys and my resting place and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it altogether. Where shall I go from your Spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there. If I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there your right had shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

care, the patience and dignity, the wistful acceptance and tireless attention to practical detail which D has shown through these last few years. We have been moved to silence by the way he spoke to her as he sorted her teeth or told her the news; the way he kept joyful memories of their long life together near the surface as their ordinary closeness faded away; the way he "loved Honoured and protected her" to the end as he promised all those years ago.

We can celebrate, too, that Neville Williams, N's home for the last two years, proves just how well it is possible to care for those who seem to have nothing to give back. As another psalm cries: "Do not cast me off in my old age." Indeed, such an institution proves we need not, we should not, and we can treasure each other to the very end.

That said, we must let N go. If the Psalm, if Christ, if our faithful hunch is right, we let her go not only into the silence of death. For beyond that huge silence she will rise to the life of heaven, where there is no more confusion, no more anxiety: where N is known by name and her voice will be heard again.

#### PRAYERS

God we thank you for N: for all she taught, for all she gave and all she still inspires. Remembering her Kings Heath childhood, we pray for Colmore and Camp Hill schools, still setting children on their feet, help them to teaching children to walk and speak with integrity. As we celebrate the long friendships she shares with D, deepen and strengthen the friendships that matter most to us.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

As we remember N's professionalism and application, we pray for our work and the prosperity and good administration of businesses of all kinds in this neighbourhood. We give thanks for N's energies and application as a mother, setting M and J on their feet. We pray for their working life to be rewarding as they apply the gifts of motivation and intellect that N, with D, has passed on to them.

#### R

As we remember N's community minded leisure time, we pray for Kings Heath, its cohesion, for ever-warmer friendship, and for all who work for the good of this neighbourhood. We pray for our stewardship of All Saints, that

you will teach us to continue and evolve the tradition of fellowship and prayer here. We pray for new initiatives, especially our older people's centre looking after many with dementia.

R

Lord, as you receive our thanks, it's only fair that you receive our sorrow and hurt at N's illness, too. Hear our prayers for all who are anxiously on the fringes of dementia; inspiring us by D's example give us all patience and strength to care for one another at such vulnerable times. We pray for those who have cared professionally for N. Continue to strengthen all at Neville Williams in their vocation of care and hospitality.

R

Lord, we do not claim perfection. We lift to you our regrets: N's mistakes and ours, our impatience.... Forgiving Lord, turn our hardest memories into wisdom.

R

Most of all, today we hold before you N's family: especially N and P, T, A and J. We pray for M and J, as the world looks different now without their mother. We pray for D. Reward his tireless care and tender loyalty with the knowledge of yours. Give him patience as he finds a whole new rhythm for ordinary days. As he entrust his life-long friend and wife to you, reassure him day and night that for N all is well.

Finally we pray the prayer your son gave us for the days we are lost for words: Our Father...

## A sensitive young man

*Killed in a motorcycle accident, R's colleagues, friends and family were articulate in sorrow. It seemed right to affirm the grieving young people by sharing some of their words, and the seriousness of meaning in the songs they had chosen. There needed to be room for anger and thanks. I found King David wouldn't go away. Here is an example of how a Bible passage can work both by similarity (the young man overlooked) and contrast (the*

*frustration that, unlike David, R's potential was not fulfilled). He was, I hope, at least honoured by the comparison.*

## INTRODUCTION

We've left the safe familiarity of home, we've cut a holiday short and flown back; we've told the RAF they must wait and left for a while the bustle of a busy Tesco store, because a pointless accident has suddenly broken into our lives and stolen a young friend, brother, son.

We come to give thanks for the sparkle of R' life, and to mourn his bewildering death; to honour his gifts, and to wonder at his vulnerability and ours; we come helpless to reverse something so frightening, but determined to try to do something beautiful to mark this painful threshold that we cross.

We come to wonder about our future as we wistfully dream about what might have been Robert's future.

We come no doubt with wide Variety of beliefs and experience. You may come to dwell on the deep stillness of the grave and to reflect on this life as all there is, and so how to grasp it and relish it for all it is worth. Some may bring rage at a God who seems to allow the wrong people to die. You may be too hurt to speak to God but wish someone would. You may share the faith that beyond death Robert will find peace in God's company and that Robert is "all right, somewhere no one can hurt him now" as Taylor Swift will sing for us later.

Whatever your faith, bringing memories from Glendon or Bavistock school, or Uni, or work or family, all are welcome.

A PRAYER for any who feel able to pray.

O God, we call you the giver of life.  
You will therefore understand our bewildered disappointment  
standing here before you;  
you know why we are hesitant approaching you today.  
For we have no-one else to blame for R's energetic young life ending.

Give us patience in grief.  
Be gentle with us in our shock.



Help us to comfort each other.  
Give us strength for the future.  
Assure us that, for Robert, all is well.  
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## ADDRESS

There's an old, old story in the Bible about a great prophet, Samuel, who was sent by God to look for a new leader for his people. God sent him to a family saying:

"You shall anoint for me the one whom I show you." When the family came before him, Samuel looked on the seven fine, handsome, tall men and thought "surely it will be one of these. But the Lord said "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." All seven passed by and Samuel said "the Lord has not chosen any of these. Are all your sons here?"

The father said "There remains the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said "Send and bring him, for we will not sit down until he comes here." They brought him. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The Lord said "Rise and anoint him. For this is the one."

(From 1 Samuel 16)

That lad, overlooked as the youngest, not likely to be let into a night-club without hassle, probably asked for his ID if he tried to by an 18 DVD<sup>2</sup>, went on to become the great King David. We love stories like that, where someone is overlooked and then suddenly their beauty or gifts are recognised then they go on to do great things. Countless movies are made of that kind of story.

It is easy to forget, though, that if you are the one feeling overlooked, or the youngest, it can be hard, waiting for your day to come. In no way did R's family overlook him. He was treasured and admired and loved. But R did feel frustrated by the very boyish looks that made him a delight to many friends. When a young man is charming and looks younger than his age, when he is helpful, and has the kind of sense of humour that can make friends feel safe, not least, female friends, then they can let down their guard a little in a way they don't do necessarily with the big, cool, older-looking guys. I don't want to generalise clumsily, of course, but it can be hard for a young man if he feels

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<sup>2</sup> R had had a lot of frustrating trouble with this.

unrecognised. The qualities that he feels give him a lesser stature, are precisely the qualities of sweetness and kindness, that make girls feel safe and affectionate. But a lad who is sweet and kind and therefore trusted and quite close, inside himself can feel overlooked when it comes to more passionate commitment. Rob could feel very much caught in between somewhere. For some years he found himself in a frustrating place, between the lightness of safely flirtatious chat, and the great seriousness with which he longed for a life partner; between honest helpfulness and inner desire; between his genuine outward charm and the inner passion, caught movingly in some of his sensuous drawings.

This young man with beautiful eyes did prove that you can be a superb trouble shooter with Tesco's technology, without being like some geek from the *Big Bang Theory*. His popularity and the respect people had for him is clear in the roadside messages and in your presence here. "Always jolly," "good dude," "you were the best mate I could speak to about anything," "Sweet and kind-hearted." Inside, though, all the while, R was building something. A kind of pedestal for someone...someone... he longed for. In the old Prayer Book wedding service the groom used to say to his bride "I thee worship." Of all modern motor bike riding, dancing, sparkly eyed technical wizards today, R is the one for whom that old fashioned promise would one day have been about right. One day. For someone.

One of the hardest things to bear today is that in R we have the tantalising beginning of that King David story. Our opening song put it very starkly, talking about "living a lie" but it at least names the gap between outward friendliness and quite low self esteem, between confident wit and inner longing. The song also named the corner that R felt he had turned. He had really sensed a new beginning. He was looking up. University finished and success at work to build on, he was thinking about full time work, about a new start, about asking someone out.... but suddenly, unlike King David, the story ends. We don't get to see what his self-discovery would mean; we don't find out what he was chosen, anointed to do. We are left with a host of "what ifs."

As one of his friends wrote, "you didn't deserve this cruel fate."

Today is not the time for explanations, or making excuses for God. Today is a day for passion: and if that means hurling curses at God, including that curse "you're not there" then so be it. Indeed there are cursing poems in the Bible

to use if we are lost for words: Faced with unjust suffering one poet in the time of handsome King David said:

"Has God forgotten to be kind? Has God lost his strength?" (psalm 77)

It's difficult to know what to do with the frustration, though. His thousand songs are silent. The USS Enterprise model will not be made. Someone else must fix that lap top. No more trips to the shops with J and C.

The only treatment I know for that kind of pain, and the only oil to anoint such emotional wounds with is the oil of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving like those you have spoken and written, for the sparkle of his eyes; for friendship; his deep respect for [*brother and sister*] A and C. For the rides out to Stratford, relishing the throaty 600cc Yamaha roar; for the brotherly conversation in Starbucks; for the intimacy of father teaching son to draw, for a mother's affection for her youngest, protecting him through illness as a baby, for his much admired older sister and brother making him an uncle; for his tenacity, coming back from a disappointing year at one University, with the courage to step up again and achieve another qualification from Aston; for his working, at Argos, then Tesco, to see him through his qualifications; for the holidays in Spain; for the way, even when going to a club on the look-out for someone worthy of the pedestal he was crafting, he would get so carried away with the sheer pleasure of dancing with T and C, that they'd simply dance the night away together. And there's the way, even with the usual impatience in the air - "you've been too long on the Playstation," matched by his impatience with Mum and Dad's computer skills, R quietly lived out another attractively old-fashioned Bible principle: "honour your father and mother." Happy to be away on a mischievous holiday in Spain, he could only really give in and enjoy it when he'd spoken to Mom on the phone.

We can also give thanks for each other: for the way an enormous commercial company can show compassion; the way young men and women can share their feelings, a family can hold together with strength, mutual respect, enormous dignity and caring wit. Then, each "what if" we are left with about R, we can also turn into thanksgiving for each other; a prompt to say out loud the encouraging things; grateful enough for each other to make room for the unseen inner longings as well as the outward confidence. We make sure R's "what ifs" are not wasted by using them as reminders never to miss the sparkle in someone's eye, however young; regrets about the good looking young man R, whose great potential, we cannot see fulfilled in this life, can

turn to good use, if we use them to help us see the human heart as the Lord sees it.

We began with a song helping us to remember his complexity. Soon we have another favourite helping us to let go. At the end we have a song remembering to help us go on. Before we say goodbye to him, I invite you, if you wish, to pray...

## Near the edge?

*A, (a woman aged 50) left a son with learning difficulties. His bright positive character would see him through. Her family gradually named the issues she lived with. How far do we have permission to touch on these? Is it presumptuous to tread into that territory, or would the service be false and brittle ignoring them? What good news do we learn from her life?*

### WELCOME

Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the earth."

With those promises in the air, we gather to mourn and give thanks for A, who knew her needy spirit, who knew the comfort of love and knew mourning. Perhaps we can call upon God and claim those promises for her today.

There are three themes held dear by the Christian tradition, but by no means belonging to it, which weave through our ceremony today: thanksgiving, realism and hope.

We will give thanks for all A has meant to us, and all the ways she expressed and encouraged love. We will name, as honestly as we can, our sorrow and frustration at her death. We will look forwards, as best we can, imagining a future without her. Some may look further ahead, into eternity, imagining with me a life beyond death, at peace with our creator, where those promises are fulfilled.

Whether or not you share that hope, whether you come to let A go into the stillness of death, or commend her to the freedom of heaven, all are welcome. For this is your parish church.

## ADDRESS

The lasting Gold of A's life; what kept her going after the disorientation of her mother's death, what tugged her back from the brink and drew the best out of her was, of course, her son R.<sup>3</sup> We gather to support him today, but he has already supported us. For he has wisely chosen three pieces of music that touch those three themes I mentioned earlier: We began with the assurance "every little thing's going to be all right." We end with gratitude that life is not only the confinement and frustration of the body, but Spirit, in the freedom of the sky. In the church's year, this week we remember the risen Christ ascended to heaven, showing our human concerns, fears and frailties are known, understood and held tenderly in heaven, understood. It is going to be all right. He has gone to prepare a place for A, a place where her weakness is not criticised or belittled, but held tenderly. With that assurance wrapped around our service, R suggests we hear another piece which, with realism, talks about tomorrow never coming. It names our loss. It declares, tomorrow will not be the same without her.

His realism in grief is refreshing and helpful. A's family's realism about her vulnerability is liberating. It frees us to remember her truthfully. After you spoke about A's often hard journey, I found a story from the Bible came to mind. A's neighbour and Lay Reader here at All Saints, M, now reads it for us.

Luke 7:36-50

The woman in that story was known as someone whose life had not been tidy. She was known as a woman who made mistakes. She knew, though, how to love. When we meet someone like that, we can focus, like Simon the Pharisee on their mistakes. Almost wanting to disapprove, sometimes, we clutch onto our tidiness as a reassurance. We don't want to understand the

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<sup>3</sup> I hope this is not to patronise, but rather to learn from and gently note the authority of the young man with learning difficulties on this occasion. He seemed to grieve with an enviably uncluttered grief, perhaps because of what others call his "disability."

needs behind a person's frailty or mistakes. We could, however, as Jesus does, and see not the woman's mistakes, but her capacity for love as defining her. Her expression of affection is rather clumsy and embarrassing to some, but she does have the courage to show it. She also weeps, showing she knows her own weakness. I'm not sure Simon, the critical onlooker knows his own weakness quite so well.

We give warm thanks for A's affection and playfulness, the childlike delight in Nintendo games and the machines at the Legion; we give thanks for enduring friendships, as with M; we give thanks for tender motherhood. The fragility, sometimes clumsiness, the ease with which those good things could wobble, though, we may trace back to a frightening experience with an intruder when she was just on the threshold of her teens. Thereafter, the sense of security she found in knowing her mother was there meant her death some years ago was seriously disorientating. We remember her feisty strength, her defiance, the arguments. We remember too, though, her longing to make up; her gestures of reconciliation. She knew the need to forgive and be forgiven, maybe shining a light on the Pharisee's incapacity for forgiveness. As Jesus' story powerfully showed: "the one who to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

There is a fine Biblical tradition, understood by the Irish more than many, that a good drink makes for a great celebration. No doubt there was wine on the table when Jesus dined with the Pharisee. Indeed, wine is at the heart of Christian ritual where wine is about remembering. Good drinking is about celebrating and remembering. It only takes a slight wobble, a slight imbalance in our lives, though, for drink to become a way of hiding. A way of forgetting. It doesn't work very well, but we easily slide from celebration and remembering into despair and forgetting with drink. We would dishonour A if we didn't name this difficulty for her. We would dishonour her more if we folded our arms like Simon the Pharisee and didn't admit it could be the same for any of us. She knew her need, like the woman who wept, and she knew how to love. Her life shortened by drink, her illness cruelly painful and diminishing, she does at least raise a humbling question for any like the Pharisee who might live more years with less life.

As a stranger, I take the risk of being presumptuous and speak, finally, a word on her behalf. As she lets go of her son, and her siblings, J, the friends who

visited the quiet bedside, not knowing whether she was recognising them, those who sat in the night, those who bore the frustration of wondering what might have been, those who had the patience to care, those who waited for reconciliation; to those who made space for her to be her vulnerable, mistaken, mourning, loving self, "thank you."

And thank God for the promise: "Blessed is the one who is poor in spirit. She will inherit the earth."

## COMMENDATION

A, Jesus promised: "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace." So go forth from this world in the love of God the father who created you, in the mercy of Jesus Christ who redeems you, in the power of the Holy Spirit who strengthens you. May the heavenly host sustain you, and the company of heaven enfold you. In communion with all who have gone before us, may you dwell this day in peace.

## An Infant

*I met this delightful couple, excitedly expecting, at a wedding. A few weeks later they called to say their son died during birth. In the same church we held his funeral. Dad is a geologist and Mum a historian. I was struck when talking about how they felt, they hardly took their eyes off each other. They were dazzlingly together in their sorrow. I wanted to do justice to this little life hardly lived but in a way this service was more about them. Their grief needed honouring. It was a supreme example of being unable to do anything about the tragedy. All we could do was try to do something beautiful.*

*(I am glad to say they now have two lively boys.)*

## INTRODUCTION

Welcome. On this exquisite autumn day, senses sharpened by the sun and the cold, we come with a measureless grief. We come to honour S's life. We come, deeply hurt to have to say farewell. We come to pray for J and D as

we try to imagine a future without S. We come to this place where, one joyful day, S heard singing.

As we begin, a prayer. If prayer is a struggle for you, don't worry. He simply must understand.

O God, we call you the giver of life.  
You will therefore understand our bewildered disappointment standing here before you;  
you know why we are hesitant approaching you today.  
For we have no-one else to blame for S's little life ending.  
Help us, Lord, to understand our grief.  
Help us to comfort each other.  
Give us strength for the future.  
Assure us that, for S, all is well.  
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

What is our grief made of? Millions of years of evolutionary pressure told you to put this baby first. D the hunter-gatherer has tried to provide for you both, while S has, without knowing, taken the first and best nourishment from everything you've eaten, J, leaving you the leftovers. You have given him everything. Yourself. There is a staggering momentum about that.

But it isn't only genes and chemicals, of course. Your emerging parenthood has also nurtured your most compassionate side. You took the risk of letting someone you don't yet know, have immense emotional power over you. Unknowingly, S nurtured in you some of the most tender feelings you have ever yet felt. For the male, wanting to help, in labour wanting to relieve pain, it's good for once to be made to wait on one side; not to be able to fix things. It is good to have to stand in awed silence, admitting the strength and vulnerability of womanhood. But that awe should give way to joy. For the female, the pain of labour should be followed by laughter and relief. Instead, we find it is followed by a sudden, bewildering silence. The pressure, that momentum, those feelings can't just evaporate. Their energy must go somewhere, but where?

Our grief may also contain some fear. Fear of the future. Dare we take the risk of handing that emotional power to another child? Dare we browse for clothes and toys for our grandchild again? Maybe there's fear of emptiness. Perhaps, too, fear that God has failed.



One of the Biblical poets wondered that.

### Psalm 77

Fearing that there is no justice in this universe is like looking into an abyss.

If this is our grief, what do we need from God?

Perhaps some sense that he isn't just watching; that he's somehow sharing this sorrow. I guess we'd also like to know if there's to be a happy ending.

S's baptism was a declaration of his humanity, his vulnerability, his beauty. It also declared something about God. It affirms that God, who came among us through the risky trauma of birth, to make himself known in Christ, does not watch from a distance, but is embroiled with us in our joys and tragedies. In his death we see him share our near despair and fear; we see God at least facing the chaotic consequences of the world's freedom.

Then, in his resurrection we catch a glimpse of a happy ending; that the injustice of his death, and S's, is overcome by God's eternal love. There is a place for us where we are known by name and loved for all eternity.

Even long before Jesus gave us that powerful assurance, the poet who dwelt on the possibility of God's failure, then, having named it, moved on: "I will declare the mighty acts of God...I will call to mind your wonders of old. You redeemed your people... You made a path through the sea." The sea representing death, the poet insists God has found a way through tragedy before and will do so again.

J and D, you looked over the edge, surely as awesome and frightening as any volcano. You have begun to find some words to help take it in. You are honest. You have with unblinking realism faced, are facing, what has happened. You have begun, just begun to imagine the future. You are gracious, in that you forgive God enough to talk to him about that future. To be so ready to love and then to have that love denied is also a feeling very, very close to that of God, who is brimming over with love for his creation: a love so rarely requited. Gracious, honest and ready to love. That suggests to me that, though far from easy, you will get through. You will discover the "path through the sea". For you are very close to God and he to you.

There will surely always be a certain wistfulness in your life, but that will not diminish you; it will deepen you. It will not stop you laughing, but it may give a warmth, a sympathy to your laughter. It will not stop you singing; but it will add resonance to your voices when you do. It will not divide you, or isolate you. It will draw you nearer to each other and open your hearts to risk loving again.

#### COMMENDATION

S, go forth from this world, which you have touched so lightly, in the love of God the Father who created you; in the company of Jesus Christ who carries you; in the power of the Holy Spirit who knows you. May the heavenly host sustain you, and the company of heaven enfold you. In communion with all who have gone before us may you dwell this day in peace.

## An elephant in the room

*A 26 year old man committed suicide. How we bear ourselves during such a funeral has a big impact on those who may come feeling shame, anger or fear. Our calm will do a great deal to reassure. Banishing euphemism, naming things honestly and kindly, leaving room for diverse feeling and opinion is the real challenge and responsibility. Letting the good news reveal itself without triteness or naivety requires a delicate balance of confidence and humility. I am not claiming to have achieved that balance. Here family politics did make the introduction to the service particularly crucial and the elephants in the room – shame and conflict – needed to be asked to leave so we could get on and grieve. It is, therefore, rather more substantial than usual.*

#### WELCOME

“Neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, nor mysterious powers: nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God, made known in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8) Therefore, J, we welcome you confident in God who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead.

Welcome, everyone, to All Saints, where J’s grandmother Mrs W worships. Many of you worship in churches of different traditions. Thank you for coming here.

We come to remember that bright, eager, sharp-eyed, smiling boy on the front of the order of service, who would grow so tall and strong. We come to

remember the hooded, brooding figure on the back of the order of service, the same handsome lines and skin, his forehead now marked with more of a frown as those sharp eyes have taken in the world's complexity, its threat and its wonder. The little boy is still there layered now with worry, joy, disappointments, friendship, parenthood, discoveries both good and bad through his twenty five years.

We come to honour and mourn a man of contrasts and complexity. Someone who gave glimpses of himself to others, but let no-one see the whole picture. Someone capable of zany hilarity and deep introspection; tender affection and deep depression. Some may see the ganjah<sup>4</sup> there as something opening up spiritual realms. Others may see it as closing down reality. Friends and partner, grandparents, brothers, sisters, father and mother, all of us are seeing him from different angles, remembering him from different times, so we gather with a kaleidoscope of different glimpses of a deep and complex man. Our memories and views of J need not compete or jostle with one another.<sup>5</sup> Rather, we can imagine them as prayers, mingling before God, the only one who sees J through and through.

Let us at the outset, though, name the bewilderment and hurt that such a gifted and sensitive man should choose to end his life. It is too, too hard that someone be given the gift of deep insight, but not feel he has the strength to bear what he sees.

Let us also, with J and A, [*his separated parents*] name the temptation to take our hurt and hurl it at each other. "It is a day to celebrate J's life, not a day for blaming," they say with wisdom and grace.

Grateful for his life, disorientated by his death, I invite you, if you wish, to pray.

God, the giver of life, we come with thanksgiving for the life and energy of J, we come with unbearable sorrow at his death. We come before you humbled by a suicide. We come vulnerable in shock. We come hurt by love. Draw near to us, Lord, and help us to understand what we can, and accept what we cannot fathom. Give us patience and honest memory. Give us peace.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the congregation were scandalised that the photograph on the back he was clearly smoking weed. There was a large cigarette in flowers on his coffin. By naming this part of his life without fear we hopefully made room for those who approved and those who didn't. Many may expect snooty judgement from the middle class white priest. I wanted to demonstrate the completeness of God's loving knowledge of us.

<sup>5</sup> The considerable tensions in the riven family again needed quiet acknowledgement. Once named, they ceased to be a threat.

## ADDRESS

Such an untimely ending leaves us with a host of impossible questions. There are countless "what ifs...?" spinning round and round in our heads with nowhere to go. Perhaps the hardest question we want to ask him as daughter, partner, mother, father, friend, sibling, is: Were we not enough to keep you here, J? Was there not enough beauty among us to make you want to stay?

We cannot reach into his mind to understand. We can only scratch around for clues in the conversations we go over and over in our minds. Hints of what was to come in texts and silences. The clue to his determination in the way he chose to die. The clue that he locked the door to protect those who love him from finding him. We cannot fully know. All we can do is trust that God fully knows. Psalm 139 says:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You discern my thoughts from afar.  
You mark out my journeys and my resting place  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,  
you know it altogether.  
Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend into heaven, you are there.  
If I make the grave my bed, you are there also.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
Even there your right hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

God has not abandoned J at any moment in his journey. God has known and understood him at every turn. The photographs in the centre pages show so many moments and moods. Uncomplicated pleasure, quizzical humour, some fear and searching, some defiance. The need for embracing. The need for independence. In all this, God knows his child J. From the times he was embraced by his mother on the doorstep, or played with his sister, or fished with his Dad, or cradled Tiarna in his arms, and in the times when he was bullied on the bus, or depressed, in prison, or planning how he was to die, from joy to despair, God knows and understands his child J.

“Even there, your right hand shall lead me” said the poet. Where we cannot reach into J’s mind, God can. God does reach him with forgiveness and the promise of heaven. His right hand shall lead him.

If we doubt the poet’s confidence, years after it was written, God came in Christ to assure us even more clearly. As we remembered at Easter, God is not only there for us when we are good, or content. Jesus knew what it was like to be arrested. It might reassure us as we wrestle with the mystery of J’ despair, that when Jesus hung there he cried to God “Why have you forsaken me?” As we see the stillness of J’ coffin before us, we might remember the stillness of Jesus’ tomb. As we wonder what next for J, we might remember how Jesus rose again to proclaim peace and forgiveness, to show God’s right hand does indeed lead us through, even the deepest despair; the deepest error. That is why I believe God welcomes J into his healing, loving presence where there is no more crying or pain, no more misunderstanding or self-doubt.

We are left, still, crying and in pain, though. We may feel we have let J down in some way. We may feel enraged that he has let us down. Remember, if God knows him through and through, he knows us, too. There is no feeling too harsh or anger too deep or curse too strong for God. He will understand if you do not want to talk to him, but you cannot put yourself out of his reach. Nothing can separate you from his love and his understanding. Indeed, it may be better to hurl those feelings at God than at each other. Perhaps naming them to him does allow him gently to begin healing and forgiving, and to give us peace.

#### PRAYERS

God, giver of life, we give you thanks for the gifts you gave J and he shared among us: his wit and energy, his friendship and dancing, the things that make us proud to know him. We honour his depth and complexity. We give thanks for his sensitivity, vulnerability and perception. We thank you for the closeness he allowed.

Lord we admit our frailty, our bewilderment and hurt that someone capable of such love should do such violence to himself. That someone who loved us could tear himself away from our friendship in this way and so, seemingly tear up the past. We thank you that you know him and pray that he will be at peace with you.

We pray for J’s whole family hurt to the core. Among them especially A and J. Calm our turning minds; soothe our troubled hearts; heal our memories. Help

us to let J go to you. Help us to trust you to care for him and understand him in ways we cannot.

We hold T [*his infant daughter*] in her unknowing sadness. Take our unmeasurable sorrow, take all our regret, and turn it into wisdom and care for each other, so that as she grows and comes to terms with the sad story of her Father's death, she will see in us that the world is a loving, forgiving place.

## Chandeliers and angels: Learning from a gay couple

*Many different shaped families call upon us in grief. Sometimes there are expectations of the church's judgement, which we need to get over before we can minister well. There is grace in some people approaching us at all when we have given them reasons not to. After work in industry, F and B began very successful antique dealing. Their house was crowded with exotic objects. B loved anything that glinted and shone.*

### WELCOME

Jesus said: "I have come in order that you might have life: life in all its fullness."

St Paul said: "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour."

"God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up" promises the Psalmist. (Ps 91:11-12)

We gather to honour the life of B, overflowing with thanks for his affection, friendship and fullness of life.

We come having travelled many miles between us, moved, hurt and disorientated by his sudden death, mourning the death of a friend, and especially supporting F, losing his partner of 27 years.

We come, no doubt with diverse beliefs and experience, not all able to share B's touchingly firm belief in angels. I welcome you to this Christian church sharing his trust that God speaks to us in many and mysterious ways; in the trust that beyond death there is life at peace with our creator. Whether or not

you are able to share that faith, all are welcome here as we gather united in our care for B and F.

We remember friends and family unable to be here, some siblings across the Atlantic and neighbour L, not well enough to be with us. We think of them and gather them into our fellowship as we begin.

#### ROMANS 12:9-18

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

#### SERMON

Light is easily taken for granted, more noticeable by its absence perhaps. But when it is caught in the cut glass crystals of a chandelier, say, it sparkles and sometimes flashes its hidden spectrum as the little prisms display the colours of which light is really made. The Christian tradition celebrates the way a human life can do the same, catching the light of our creator's love and displaying its colours to the world. In his generous, honest friendship, B has done that for us. His compulsive buying was about more about human transaction and relationship than possession. His charm was about connection, not manipulation. His delight in things of beauty, from Garden pots to lavish antique picture frames, was about relishing being alive. His friendship was loyal. His hospitality was warm. As St Paul said, these are the colours of divine love: hospitality, humility, empathy, generosity, a capacity for rejoicing.

These are not mere soft and cuddly qualities. There is a defiant strength in such fullness of life. For there were prejudices to face. He taught people skills in electronics but saw them promoted past him. F and B reached across the boundaries of colour to form a beautiful partnership, but not everyone is

at ease with that. They have no doubt borne the prejudice of some who are afraid or jealous of the strength and affection of a gay partnership. The Church, tragically has conspired with such needless fear, which I for one regret. But B's choice was to overwhelm any such rejection with hospitality, by forging friendship and relishing parties. He did not repay evil for evil. He chose joy over haughtiness; he chose generosity over bitterness. That is a firm and gracious choice. That is the power of the Gospel. That is a display of the colours of God's love which banishes bitterness and frees us to fullness of life.

#### PRAYERS

God, our creator, we thank you for all you have taught us through B. As we thank you for his friendship, his skill, his playfulness and joy, we pray that you will dissolve our cynicism, and refresh tired and careworn souls.

As we remember his loyalty, we pray for all the relationships that matter most to us. Teach us anew to honour one another and live humbly in harmony with one another.

As we remember his glimpses of angels, playful as the light of a chandelier, we pray that you rekindle our faith and hope of heaven.

As we remember his courage and adventurousness, we pray for readiness to grasp the opportunities you give us for fullness of life.

Lord, we do not claim perfection. We lift to you our regrets today, B's mistakes and ours; the things we wish we had said more tenderly or done more graciously. Turn even our deepest regrets into wisdom.

We pray for all who mourn B, especially his brothers and sisters and his son M. Most of all we hold F before you as home feels so different now, B suddenly taken away, so many of the things he chose now wistful in their stillness. We thank you for F's loyalty, his candour and dignity in grief, and pray that you will draw near to reassure and strengthen him with the knowledge that, for B all is well.

#### COMMENDATION:

May flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest. (from the Orthodox funeral liturgy)



## Do not cast me off in my old age (Psalm 71:9)

*Visiting, I found a relatively simple, uncluttered grief, in a family who loved M, but perhaps felt her life had not reached out very far. I wanted to show how attentive God is to such a life, how much there is to admire and did so by letting two very famous Biblical characters evoke M's character and highlight her faith. Her seemingly small story, then, is woven in with the great Biblical narrative of faith. Without needing to make grand claims for her, Simeon and Anna revealed her enormous strength and allowed for a kindly naming of her flaws.*

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus said "I have come that you might have life: life in all its fullness."

We come to celebrate the long, family-filled, Kings Heath-anchored life of M B. As we do so, three themes, held dear in the Christian tradition, but by no means belonging to it, weave through our service: thanksgiving, realism and hope. We give thanks with J and E for M's long life; we admit our grief and frailty; we look to the future, both that remaining to us here, but also, perhaps further, to eternity.

Whether you share M's quiet faith in the hope of heaven, at peace with our creator, or you prefer to reflect on the deep stillness of the grave, all are welcome.

### ADDRESS

Luke 2:27-38

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you let your servant go in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and

to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Widowed too young, living a full, often energetic life to her mid-eighties, perhaps you can see why this encounter with two older people in the Bible came to mind as you shared M's story. Anna and Simeon reveal such light and shade in the relationship between generations, and in the navigation of parenthood and grief. A widow for a long time, Anna has found a way of living in spite of the unjust loss of her husband J. She seems to have stayed open to joy, even in her sadness. Just so, M has had to navigate the long years since her J's harsh illness and difficult death, and she has done so with dignity. M's openness to laughter – can you picture with her daughters in onezies on Christmas Day? - her working at community, especially the Masonic Widow's group; her applying her intellect at the Camera club and forging in the Friends' meeting at the scout hut. Marjory was deeply rooted in this locality, from Colmore School, to marriage at All Saints, to secretarial work at local schools, to homemaking in Howard Road, she has an anchorage, a sense that all she needs from God is here in this place. There is also great resilience in M, from her firm defiance of her father's disapproval of her relationship with J in the early days, going out, chaperoned by then baby cousin J, to her vigorous gardening until breaking her hip a few years ago, she showed inner and physical strength. In her solitude she showed perhaps surprising gumption arranging Johnson's holidays for herself, not simply staying home as part of her was tempted to do. We can hear some resonance with the vigorous, outward looking Biblical Anna.

Yet among this glimmering energy and sociability were threads of sadness, disappointment, maybe sometimes tiredness in widowhood. It could be hard being out with friends who were still couples now she was alone. Thoughts of forging another relationship were kept at bay, not because she could not enjoy the friendship, but rather because she could not face the possibility of another loss.

And yes, there is Simeon, also in the scene, rather more wistful, tired, warning of the pain of loss that Mary will experience. He is very faithful, and relieved to go, proud of the next generation, but there is sadness in his voice. M knew the deep pain of loss. She was proud of her daughters and enjoyed their adult company as much as their childhood. Like Simeon and Anna, in old age she was faithful, and realistic about emotional pain. When feeling raw or anxious or out of sorts, she would steady herself in prayer beside a picture of the altar at All Saints where she had stood with J to receive God's blessing in marriage.

We might notice, too, that Simeon and Anna have wisdom to pass on to the next generation. Like M, they are worth listening to for their experience and their faith in adversity. But like M, they give their advice whether Mary and Joseph want it or not. Yes, you can hear the uninvited instructions over the shoulder about what to do with this or that plant.

One rather sad, one rather joyful, M reminds us of both Simeon and Anna, both aspects interweaving through her energetic and thoughtful, positive yet also wistful life.

Having held the Christ child, Simeon died content that God is with us through thick and thin, here to share our pain and our joy. For us, M died rather suddenly, and we feel for J and E absorbing that tender shock. Home is so different now without her. No more pub lunches with D, or chatter about alternative medicine; no more conviviality at the Lodge. But perhaps Simeon's words can reassure us that it is all right to let her go, to be held by the One to whom she turned to find peace:

"Lord, now let your servant go in peace,  
for her eyes have seen your salvation..."

## PRAYERS

God, our creator, we thank you for M, for her mind and wit, her heart and depth of feeling. We honour her faith and fortitude through early widowhood, protecting her girls as best she knew how, from the cruelty of J's illness and death. We remember fondly her energy and vigour, in earlier times. Continue to teach and inspire us through our priceless memories of her, banishing self-pity from our lives and helping us make the most of the blessings under our noses.

Remembering her combination of sorrow and joy, we pray that, with Simeon, Anna and M, you will keep us from both naivety and cynicism, equally inhibiting of life. Show us how to name our sorrows without bitterness, how to rejoice in times of pain, how to pray when the world seems to fall around us.

We thank you for J and E, and the different ways they and M have supported and encouraged each other in different phases of their lives. Honouring their mutual love, affectionate criticism, and patient watchfulness, we pray for our whole community, for such mutuality and care and respect to abound.

We pray for all M's family, as we take in the enormity and simplicity of her death. Especially be with E and J, as the world looks different now without her anchorage and they find a new rhythm of life.

Thankful for all M's gifts, candid about her imperfections and ours, we pray for all the relationships precious to us, in the words your Son has taught us: Our Father...

## Too close? A funeral for someone you love

*With my family, I felt I should take my Father's funeral. He was an artist, photographer and teacher who loved walking. It was held in their local parish church which has a fine set of Burne-Jones windows, a passion for him in his study and teaching. They did a lot of work for us in the service. With people we know well, of course, it's the question of what to leave out, not what to put in, that we struggle with.*

When I look at the work of your Fingers, the moon and the stars, O God, what are human beings that you are mindful of us? Mere mortals that you care for us? Yet you have made us little lower than angels, and crowned us with glory and honour. (cf Psalm 8:3-5)

With strings stretched across the studio establishing perspective for a painting, or the symbol on the focussing ring of an SLR, artists and photographers name infinity every day; the vanishing, an oblivion that might be a something. The Divine, perhaps.

We gather to honour and give thanks for Rod, for Dad, whose artistic versatility, teaching, humour, music and friendship have enriched us in different ways. Whether you come remembering his charm and talent amidst the creative youthful energies of Liverpool College of Art, or the Grassendale newlyweds, or Arrow Park parenthood and commuting, or Mather Avenue anchorage and hospitality, thank you all for being here.

Perhaps this can be a safe place to name our sorrow and fear of loss; to face the blind cruelty of illnesses stealing faculties; to accept that Rod's encyclopaedic mind is now still; and maybe to wonder at our own vanishing.

May it be a time of gratitude for Dad's fullness of life, for something he taught, for his creativity and for his gentle death.

A prayer for any who wish to pray:

#### PRAYER

God you hold in your gaze the minute detail and grand sweep of your creation; you inhabit light and dark;

You have nurtured in us both knowledge and wonder.

You give us eyes to look, minds to see and hearts to behold.

As we accept Rod's death, hear our thanks for the gifts he shared with us, the things he has shown us and the art he leaves with us.

Hold us in our tearful vulnerability and show us a way through.

We pray grateful for the one whose death and resurrection reveal your closeness and clear the rugged path to heaven<sup>6</sup>, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

#### REFLECTION

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<sup>6</sup> This will be echoed at the end of the service in the hymn "Father, hear the prayer we offer." Even if most don't notice, attention to such detail can give coherence and shape to the whole. Reference, for example, to the lyrics of a song a family has chosen can very helpfully honour their perception and show the continuity between church and world. If there is good news, it will be visible there as well as in the Bible. The Bible helps us to see it.

Passionate, strenuously patient, moody, often in need of solitude, shy but more than engaging as a public speaker<sup>7</sup>, Moses, famously, turned aside to behold a burning bush.

Moses came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ...

Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry ... and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land...flowing with milk and honey...

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' (Exodus 3)

Whenever we turn aside to behold a work of art, before we decide whether we like it or not, or feel moved or puzzled by it, in the very act of looking, we say "here I am," and admit to ourselves that the world might not only be as we see it.

While not making embarrassing claims for Dad, observant Moses strikes a pleasing minor chord with Dad's story. His flawed persistence, impulse and dedication led others to apprehend the One who said simply "I am who I am". Inquisitive, that day Moses discovered that the world did not have to be as Pharaoh saw it. He would assert later that artistic skill, craftsmanship and teaching are gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. (Exodus 35:30-36:1) That wasn't to say artists are especially good, but it is to say their work takes us near the heart of what it is to be human. Artists give us our burning bush moments when we admit that the ground might just be holy.

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<sup>7</sup> This could be a description of Dad. Hearers would at first think I was describing him. This is not, I hope, to play or show off. It is to allow biblical resonance with a person's character to work on us.

A friend stood with Dad in the garden. She saw children playing parachute games. Dad observed the effect of the sunlight shining through the fabric and how “the image chang[ed] every time the parachute moved. I shall never forget the moment, as unbeknown to him, you Father taught me something special,” she wrote. Of course there is nothing superior about his perception, it’s just a wonderfully different one to have in the mix. “Have you noticed, the world might be like this?” he whispers.

In his solitary reflection and deeply private process of painting, Dad wondered at the grand sweep of creation, at human creativity in finely detailed architecture, at clumsy demolition, and at the way our endeavours eventually melt back into the landscape, ashes to ashes, you might say. With few words of explanation, he gave us things to turn aside and behold. Catching in magnificent abstracts the geometry and disorder as you move through the city; or showing the purple solidity of a mountain through the blurring movement of the rain; or displaying the blue that shimmers through the terracotta heat of a Spanish square, Rod gives us excuses to turn aside and wonder.<sup>8</sup>

Moses, we heard, was in awe, but still interrogated the oddly burning bush, wanting to know how it could be and what it might mean. As a solitary boy, Dad bought magic tricks and was as excited taking them apart to see how they worked as he was performing them. With echoes of music hall heritage he has played the piano with playful energy in pubs and parties, yet he knew the music was made of dominant sevenths and major fifths. He loved the deep tick of the grandfather clock, but had re-built it from a box of loose bits with eye watering patience. He savoured words like “burnt umber,” “fresco” and “egg tempera” and took care to know their composition, while wistfully admiring the ancient masters. But his intricate knowledge and taking apart did not dampen wonder. It enriched it.

Knowing how things worked equipped him sometimes to solve things, too: our budget caravan was soon fitted with luxuries, a TV shelf, extra-large gas cooker, a painted wooden safety rail for the top bunk. Then, there were more nutty solutions: quite unembarrassed, he’d strap a torch to his head to read in a hotel room.

There is an irony in Dad’s offering us moments to wonder that the world might not only be as we see it. For he was not always ready to see the world

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<sup>8</sup> Everyone had been given postcards of these works to keep.

as anyone else saw it. His articulate passion for many ancient painters goes curiously quiet when talking of contemporary artists. He gratefully acknowledged influences such as Edward Burra, but has had little to say about many others. Going deeper, perhaps his love for the Pre-Raphaelites whose luminous work looks silently on today, was not straight-forward, with their women's passive beauty, eyes downwards. We can admit that Dad did have to work to make room in his heart, for example, for Mum's commitment to taking a degree, and her promotion to senior management at school, or work in the Romanian orphanage. He did work it through, though. His pride in her overcame any lurking prejudice.

Mum had perceived Dad's flaws straight away, of course. Seeing a certain arrogance, after their first meeting at Flo and Albert's house, she said to her Mother, "I pity the woman who ends up with him." Soon, though, she knew there was much more to him. Meanwhile he persisted, not put off by the truly memorable break-the-awkward-silence moment at the Woodlands when she asked: "would you like to see the mortuary?" He pressed on past Arthur's forbidding frown and, although sometimes having to take refuge in Christmas flu, he navigated painful Woodlands politics, knowing Mum was worth it. Indeed, Mum is one person who has helped Dad discover the world might not only be as he sees it.

Lovingly accepting and maybe admiring his ambiguities, we know Rod's teaching was inspiring and effective, his enthusiasm contagious. As children we were often bored in galleries, then slightly indignant, then proud as people started to follow us around overhearing Dad talking about the pictures.

His hands moved following the shape of a piece of music, showing you that a key change was coming. You couldn't help being irritated that he was telling you what to feel about the piece, yet awe-struck at the vast musical knowledge gleaned since those teenage evenings with John Wright, when a Beethoven Symphony required three vinyl discs.

Pupils at Sefton and Quarry were enlivened by his witty energy and skill. NADFAS art history lectures enriched people's retirements. Between, Notre Dame years were the highlight, a period evoked by the final piece of music as we leave today: packed-lunch banter in the pottery studio with Ifor; field trips to Caerdeaon full of dormitory pranks, dawn walks, and countless Welsh names for Dad to over-pronounce: Glyder Fach; Crib Gogh; the Rhinnogs. Much further back, in his twenties on National Service in Singapore, amidst



the ugliness of army life and his loathing of conflict, Dad found beauty to relish: the tangle of a boatyard, untouchable dreamy girls serving drinks to soldiers in bars, wet paddy fields and mysterious temples, the day-job of aerial photography over the jungle and especially the chance to deliver art classes at the British Council, which are credited with launching the careers of some of Singapore's most influential artists. Like artesian water, images of Wales and Singapore resurfaced years later in the studio.

When called, Moses said "no" at first but then did get on with the job. Dad often wanted to say no. He did generally end up with a yes, often thanks to patient encouragement from Mum.

There was a "no" in the locked studio and introspection. There was a certain self-indulgence in the rhythm of his day. I suspect more hours were spent on pottering and idiosyncratic lunch preparations and One-o'clock-news naps than actually at the easel when the "light was just right." But all that circling, preparing, was an intrinsic part of the process, and accounts for the intensity and quality of what he did produce in those few hours.

Any fatherly severity was shot through with enormous generosity and sense of occasion: Breton Crêpes too expensive? Make a flask of batter and take the camping stove to the beach to eat pancakes among the anemone studded rock pools. Rainy Welsh holiday? Take the stove to a cave and laugh as the sausages float in the rain water pouring onto our plates from the stone roof. Relive Spanish holidays with slides fading one into the next, Rodrigo's guitar concerto drifting around. Welcomed into the Notre Dame studio at half term we'd smell the oils and inks, Colette making sophisticated screen prints and me, clumsy lino cuts. Saw dust-smelling Christmas secrets were prepared over weeks in the garage. We saw the serious artist helpless with tears of laughter before Spike Milligan and Monty Python. Zany humour broke out with surprise. When some horrible little boy had given Mum a fright with a rubber spider, Dad "cheered her up" by getting in the wardrobe, then falling out with staring Hammer Horror eyes onto the bed. Rude asides clearly meant to be overheard by passers-by startled us into blushing laughter. A painting of Guildford Street or Turl Street appeared, connecting with us at university in a way the articulate teacher could not always find words for.

And his great wordless "yes" is in all his work. He confided that every work has some way through: an open door, an alley, a crack of light. Both Freudian and Christian insights about that can play together happily.

George Herbert catches this “no-but-yes” demeanour:

Ah, my dear angry Lord,  
Since thou dost love, yet strike;  
Cast down, yet help afford;  
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;  
I will bewail, approve;  
And all my sour-sweet days  
I will lament and love.

Where there was lament, Dad worked it through inside. Jo and John next door were probably aware as anyone of how Dad was at any stage, because they could hear him play the piano alone in the house. When Colette and Peter were visiting from Australia, for instance, the music went up a gear in anticipation. But the first dismaying sign to him of his dementia, he said much later, was an inability to transmit musical notes from page, to hands. We could only guess when he secretly recognised Parkinson’s affecting his finest hand movements. Round and round inside the worry must have gone in the solitude of the studio, Mather Avenue traffic sliding by. He assimilated it remarkably, and ceded control more graciously than we might have expected. He and Mum together navigated these last few years with careful patience. Having given him room, Mum, in vigorous years to say no, but mean yes, and so leave us all those paintings, you then gave him a safe place for his physical decline: safe enough for us even to find beauty and humour in loss. Thanks to you, the illnesses’ attempted theft of dignity failed utterly.

In his frailty, St Paul said:

“Do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-17)

Rod, in all your strength and weakness, for opening us to the eerie beauty of what can be seen, and showing the way through, the crack of light, the weight of glory, we love you.

## PRAYERS

Lord, hear us.

### **Lord, graciously hear us.**

God with us, we picture Rod's walk, the evacuee boy exploring Yorkshire, his artistic perception germinating; the bouncing adult gait, comical on Mather Avenue, more impressive along the Pennine Way, the pathos of his Parkinson's shuffle, and we wonder at his journey, each stage enriching the next. God walk with us all the days of our life. Show us the beauty of the moment, blending the colours of diligence with playfulness, knowledge with wonder and patience with passion.

R

God knowing us, we give you thanks for Rod's sharp eyes and skilled hands enriching our perception, deepening our sympathy. As we turn aside to see his work, open our minds and hearts to behold your creation: the ordinary aflame with glory. Remembering his poised hands sketching in the air at the end, help us trace the beauty, where at first there seems none: in frailty, the beauty of tenderness; in dementia, the delicacy of facial expression; in a bruising world, the extravagance of art.

R

God forgiving us, we bring our regrets; our wondering at what might have been: was perfectionism inhibiting? Did introspection dampen laughter? Did we clumsily offend or take offence? Accept our imperfect offerings. Establish the perspective of your infinite love to turn regret into wisdom and contradiction into humour, and turn darkness towards your light.

R

God healing us, the crowd of brushes stand so still; there has been anguish and hurt. We wonder at our future. You taught us in Dad's slow work that efficiency isn't everything. In his illness, when things could not be cured or solved, we thank you for showing us the patient friendship that heals, the unembarrassed company that reassures, the compassion that dignifies.

R

We pray for Anna and Joe, for Colette and especially Mum, finding a new rhythm of life without him. Moved by her care, reassurance, anchorage and

night time worry patiently borne, we ask your Spirit now to take the strain with her to release it gently.

R

We pray for anyone fearing diagnosis, or tired from caring and give thanks for those who have professionally helped Mum and Dad through these last few years: for superb health care and humane judgement, for nurses going an extra mile, for attention to partner as well as patient, for the calm attentiveness of staff at Redholme. We pray for reward in their work and that one day, should they need it, someone will be there to care for them. With the art of compassion, teach us in every generation that the world need not be as Pharaoh sees it.

R

*The service ended with a blessing from the time of Moses:*

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.