

ASTRID ANN NORMAN ROWSEL RIP

This is not a sermon or a homily and does not need a scriptural text but when thinking of Astrid two consecutive verses of St Paul's epistle to the Romans spring to mind. To those who only knew Astrid in recent years after her health was so challenged:

Chapter 12, verse xii might seem appropriate

“Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer.”

But to those who remember Astrid as one of the bright young things who first appeared at St Mary's as the 1960s turned into the 1970s,

Chapter 12, verse xiii might more accurately describe her:

“Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality” – especially the “given to hospitality because ...so many of us got to know Astrid through the generous hospitality she extended at the flat she shared in Cranmer court with her friend Charlotte. After many a St Mary's event people would be invited to Astrid's for lunch or dinner, often quite spontaneously – for Astrid was the Queen of spontaneous entertaining – and often in large numbers.

There was one occasion when there had been some big do on a Friday night here at St Mary's and a large number of people, many servers and choir members as well as others, had gone back to Astrid's and partied the night away and because the next day was Saturday and the Cranmer Court flat was spacious, a large number of chaps fell asleep on chairs or sofas or on the floor, where they were discovered in situ by Astrid the next morning. She telephoned Fr Gilling to tell him about the party and said that 14, or whatever the precise figure was, men had slept in her flat. Now in those days there was just one telephone line at the Presbytery and all the priests shared it with an extension in each flat and Dr Mascall always took an interest in the contents of phone calls to the Presbytery whether they were for him or not and he enquired of Fr Gilling about the phone call from Astrid. Fr Gilling, being mischievous, shouted down from his flat on the top floor “Astrid slept with 14 men last night.” “Good Heavens said Fr Mascall, “that is more than the empress Messalina!”

Astrid made St Mary's her London church because she liked and was familiar with, the ordered and principled, obviously catholic liturgy, something with which she was thoroughly familiar from her upbringing and regarded as her style, from worshipping at Tewkesbury Abbey, where the great Cosmo Gabriel Rivers Pouncey was then the vicar. After that St Mary's was the obvious place for her in London.

However, although we at St Mary's are regularly inclined to think that we are the centre of the universe, that was not the reason why Astrid left her home in Worcestershire to come to London via a trip to America. Astrid came to London to read for the bar at Gray's Inn and there was something very special about that because Astrid was one of the last of that generation who were able to go straight from school, to the Inns of Court without a university degree, notwithstanding the fact that her mother was a graduate of Somerville; and going straight from school to read for the bar, was a much harder and more intensive way of doing it; but Astrid came through her bar exams with flying colours. She had attended lectures and tutorials assiduously and read comprehensively (in fact avid reading was to remain with Astrid throughout her life) and many of her colleagues were anxious to borrow Astrid's notes in those last days as the dreaded bar finals approached. One such was my friend and colleague from my former chambers with whom I share a house in France, Stewart Jones QC, who texted me from France last night to say that he remembers Astrid looking radiant and happy at her twenty first birthday in February 1971.

But to give the impression that Astrid spent all her time at Gray's Inn immersed in study would be quite wrong. Astrid was nothing if not a party girl and she and her friend Clarissa Dickson-Wright later one of the two Fat ladies of cooking fame, were the doyennes of the Gray's Inn common room and bar in those heady days.

As I said Astrid came through her bar exams with flying colours and was called to the bar at the incredibly young age of 21, the only woman to have achieved that distinction. She then went on to complete two six months' pupilages, as one did in those days, but in her case, with great success. I am afraid though, that our profession was not as enlightened in those days and unless a woman had legal connections already (or was bit more of an old boot than Astrid could ever have been) it was still hard for her to secure a tenancy in chambers and this proved to be the case

for Astrid. However, she was not daunted by this and although she would make the odd rueful remark about it, she certainly never carried a chip on her shoulder and promptly got herself a job in the Government Legal service in the Official Solicitor's office. Now explaining to you what went on there would be just too boring for words, which is probably why Astrid did not stay there very long.

There was one rather amusing episode whilst she was there though. At that time I was working temporarily in the Treasury Solicitor's office where I shared a room with a chap who was engaged in protracted dealings with the Official Solicitor. Now although I knew Astrid's name, at St Mary's, she was always Astrid or Strida and I did not put two and two together when my room mate at work kept going on about letters he received from Miss A Rowsel and how he could never speak to her on the telephone. We even made smutty school-boy remarks about A Rowsel before the penny dropped and I realized it was Astrid. I then had a word with her at church and she was able to put my colleague out of his misery and deal with his case. Astrid never lost her legal knowledge and acumen, she did of course go on later to work for the Citizens Advice Bureau, but also here in her village as she regarded it, she would hold impromptu legal clinics in the Fox and Hounds or outside and would dispense legal advice enabling would be claimants to get all their benefit entitlements or tenants to outwit their landlords.

However, the fusty goings on of the Official Solicitor's office were not for Astrid because she, like Mrs Wentworth-Brewster in a Bar on the Piccola Marina had discovered that life was meant for living! Indeed it was in Italy, like Mrs Wentworth-Brewster, that it could be said that Astrid also made that discovery. For round about 1974 she went to cook for a family who became her friends in Orezzo, which she greatly enjoyed and which was to open up her amazing talent which was to lead to a successful career as a wonderful cook. But before all that began there was a return trip to Italy with David Burgess and Kate Costelloe, the year before their marriage which revealed another of Astrid's accomplishments. Astrid was sharing a room with Kate in Cestri la Vantri and after dinner and before going to bed Astrid announced that as it was such a lovely evening she was going onto the beach. Kate went to bed and fell asleep. The next morning she was horrified to see that Astrid's bed had not been slept in. When she and David went downstairs to debate what to do, totally unphased and covered in seaweed, Astrid appeared having had a

wonderful time swimming, for Astrid was a good and strong swimmer. This was revealed again when she went to work as cook and house-keeper to the Lowry-Corry family – former pillars of St Mary’s – at Edwardstone Hall in Suffolk. This was when Astrid was going through a difficult period, but Rosemary Lowry-Corry telephoned me to say that having been taken to the beach Astrid was a new woman. Now swimming in the North sea off the Suffolk coast even in summer is no mean feat but Astrid swam for hours completely outdoing the Lowry –Corry Labrador which was left exhausted and panting on the beach. Also, thinking of Astrid in a swimming costume reminds one of the stunning figure Astrid had and some of the wonderful frocks she wore. Kate still says she was very envious.

The epilogue to the Italian trip, which is so Astrid, was that the Italian friends she went to see were not there as she had not told them she was coming, so she came back to London and appeared on my doorstep with a huge armful of fresh herbs – goodness how she got them through customs. It was on that trip that Astrid discovered, and discovered how to make, pesto. Something many of us had not even heard of then. And culinary talk of course leads on to one of Astrid’s greatest successes, her cooking; whether it was a dinner for friends in her flat or a parish lunch for the entire congregation Astrid always rose to the occasion and produced magnificent meals. After delectable main courses with appropriate accompaniments when one might have expected something like strawberries and cream Astrid would produce the most magnificent pavlovas or mille-feuilles or quite often both. My mouth waters at the memory.

There has been a history of eccentric curates here – in the days when we had them – and one decided one Christmas that there should be a Christmas lunch for people who would otherwise be on their own: this was mainly him and his friends and certain old ladies of the parish with Astrid roped in to do the cooking which, Astrid being Astrid, was more than willing to do but I did not think she was wholly enthusiastic about it. In a telephone call in the evening I asked her how it had gone to which she replied: “fine darling, but I was the only widow under forty and the rest were queens!”

She also did successful catering on a commercial scale. She always provided lunches for the Diocese of Europe’s synods and meetings in London and through the agency of Fr Skeogh – always “Mother Dear” to Astrid – she cooked for the Bishop of London Graham Leonard

including his post cenotaph lunch for the cabinet on Remembrance Sunday when Astrid cooked for and met the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Now Astrid's life was not without trials and tribulations, indeed one might think that she had more vicissitudes thrown at her than was reasonable for one human being to have to accept, but I am not going to dwell on those because Astrid did not, she rose above them, she never allowed adversity to get her down –“ patient in tribulation” as St Paul says and that was because of her strong catholic faith and her devotion not only to God but to her neighbours - in the gospel sense of that word. Faith was very important to Astrid; unless she was in hospital or away, she always came to high mass at St Mary's on a Sunday, although her arrival time at mass might have displayed an unconventional approach to devotion, but that was no doubt an eccentricity acquired from her dear friend Roddie Gradidge, another great St Mary's character from a previous generation of bright young things whose house in Chiswick was the venue for many of the parties where Astrid was the belle of the ball; Roddie thought it positively discourteous to arrive at mass before the sermon had at least begun.

But her faith and devotion were not restricted to church; they very much governed her outlook on, and her approach to, life in general and she very much valued the spiritual input from her many priest friends and also from important lay friends to whom, she was always Strida, Michael Mundy, John Greenhalgh who's anniversary of death occurs on Saturday and Tony Warren who sadly cannot be here today. I remember once at a time of particular difficulty when in need of some spiritual succour Astrid telephoned me quite late and talking of various priest friends that she did not feel could quite help said “well the trouble is Stephen (Fr Stephen Coles here today) has got Russell, Trevor (Fr Trevor Richardson sadly now deceased as well) has got Huwgie – his friend Huw Spratling the composer and Fr Gilling says I am beyond the range of his pastoral experience so I am going to have tea with Mother (Fr skeogh) tomorrow!”

For the last few years of her life Astrid was subject to the increasing effects of pain and illness but she bore it all with enviable fortitude, strengthened as she was by her faith and comforted and supported by Mark. Her faith and devotion remained with her throughout and nobody should be surprised to know that a week ago last Friday during the afternoon Fr Cherry, her parish priest,

gave her the last rites and while he was still there, with her sister Brigid and her friend Jane, Astrid quietly slipped away.

As I have said, Astrid prepared sumptuous banquets for us, for bishops and prime ministers, but we believe she is now on her way to a banquet that surpasses even those she prepared: the heavenly banquet where she will be in eternity with Our Lord, Our Lady, the saints and all her family and friends who have gone before and we pray for her on her journey and for those she loved and are left behind that they too will join her at that great feast. Amen