

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Bourne Street on Saturday 17th July 2021, at a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of Fr Bill Scott by The Right Reverend and Right Honourable The Lord Chartres, GCVO ChStJ PC FSA OBE FBS

"A true shepherd of the flock, a true father of his people will live on in their grateful memory even after death." The words of a great parish priest, St John of Kronstadt. They are proved by our gathering here to honour the memory of Fr Bill.

The memories we represent go back to the very beginning. Irene Reid remembers Bill as a baby arriving from the hospital. Then there are representatives from almost every stage of Bill's ministry. Some indication of the esteem in which Bill is held is conveyed by the presence of Lady Susan Hussey representing Her Majesty the Supreme Governor; the Earl of Rosslyn representing the Prince of Wales; Captain Sir Nicholas Wright representing the Princess Royal, Mrs Diana Duke representing Princess Alexandra and Bishop Christopher Hill, the former Clerk of the Closet. They are an honoured part of a festive gathering of friends who loved him and were faithful to him right to the end of his earthly pilgrimage and beyond.

So what was so special about him? He was certainly not an icon of ecclesiastical management. Engagements were recorded in pencil, not always legibly in a small black diary to which only he had access. One of his curates lent him a book on time management, planning and paper work but when after the passage of a month he asked for it back, Bill had to confess that he had lost it.

The gift of administration is doubtless very useful but it is not the heart of the priestly life. A mystery worshipper from the Ship of Fools web site reported on one of Bill's sermons delivered at Evensong here in St Mary's, "Father Bill spoke very movingly of how love makes the beloved see beauty within himself and how this in relation to God can enrich our prayer."

It was a theme to which he constantly returned. One woman recalled how, after a painful divorce, her life had been transformed by Bill. "I asked him what I needed to do to please the Lord and in one sentence he said, Allow him to love you. What he said healed me."

Bill was a great priest, glad to be with God for the sake of the people he served and glad to be with people of all sorts and conditions for the sake of God.

Paul in his second letter to the Christians of Corinth, writes [2Cor.II: 17] "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary in Christ we speak before God with sincerity like men sent from God." When I ponder those words I think of Bill.

Priests are not called to be salesmen for God. He does not need our merchandising. Christian priesthood is not a profession; it is a vocation, a covenant, a kind of possession by the holy and eternal God. As it says in the letter to the Hebrews [V: 4] "no man taketh this honour to himself but he that is called by God as was Aaron". Bill experienced this calling from an early age and despite periods of dryness and anxiety he never lost it.

But a genuine calling is always tested and deepened by suffering. The true priest is one "who can have compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way for that he himself is

compassed with infirmity". The letter to the Hebrews goes on to say that although Jesus Christ was the Son of God "yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered".

Bill was very sensitive and felt the trials, the slights and conflicts of church life very deeply but by prayer he turned pain into gifts for those many people who came to him for spiritual direction. The insight which he was given was never oppressive but experienced as a channel of healing. As one of the sisters at All Hallows Ditchingham said, "Bill was never taken in by any pretence he might meet in we sisters, because he was utterly without pretence himself. Often I found with him very little needed to be said."

Our partnership began when he was called to St Mary's to succeed the justly revered Fr John Gilling. I have always cherished Fr Gilling's advice to preachers here - "make it brief and highly superstitious". I recall Cardinal Basil Hume saying in those days that Bourne Street made his own Cathedral "look like a Wesleyan preaching shop".

Bill rapidly established his own gentle authority. St Mary's continued to be what it is now, unapologetically Anglo-Catholic but everything was done, in Bill's words, "decently and in order".

He was never happier than when he was at the altar caught up in the divine mystery and drawing people into communion with God. And out of the sanctuary he was the life and soul of innumerable parties. His fabled Christmas lunches in the ample dining room of the presbytery always assembled a colourful cast of characters, both priests and lay people who would otherwise have been alone. He was not a noisy person, thank God, but I can still hear his infectious laugh and distinctive Glaswegian tones.

There was never a wrong note. In this respect Royal service is a very severe test. Courts are full of temptations to pretence and gossip but Fr Bill from the kitchen to the drawing room to the throne room was unfailingly gracious and always the same to one and all. He was known and loved not as a courtier but as a priest first and last.

The memory of Bill is a reminder of essential things which we are in danger of forgetting as a Church. We live at a time of disorientation. There is a malaise which even afflicts some priests who seem to have no idea of who or what they are; no clear idea of what they are trying to do or why they are trying to do it.

This has tempted some to describe aspects of our church tradition including priestly ordination as "key limiting factors" as they search to connect with "young people".

It is true that we have been overtaken by very rapid social change in which we can expect the Holy Spirit to reshape the Church. As an era in which perhaps we felt too much at home, passes away, it is right to look expectantly for the living forms that Jesus and his Church will take in the Christian centuries to come. But alongside this proper expectancy there is an insidious temptation to believe that we can abbreviate the birth pangs of the new age by drastic surgery when we really don't have the spiritual insight to understand what we are doing.

It seems to me that we are in particular danger of reducing the Christ given sacramental character of the Church to a thin and insubstantial sociological concept. The Wesley brothers were well

aware of the potential of lay led cells for praise, mutual encouragement and study of the bible. Such gatherings are as relevant and fortifying today as they were in the 18th century. But as the Wesleys would have been the first to point out they complement but cannot replace the Church. The Church worthy of the name is brought into being by baptism and nourished by the eucharist it grows into the place where we can be incorporated as very members of the body of Christ.

The reality of the Church is constituted not by the prescriptions of some committee but by the celebration of the transformative eucharist by an ordained priest in the presence of the community of the faithful. The priest is the representative of the Diocesan Bishop and together they are knots in the net which maintains the unity of the church in faithfulness to the teaching of the Apostles. This is how it has been over many centuries and in many different cultures.

As Richard Hooker said the eucharist properly celebrated is “performative and not merely illustrative”. The Eucharist builds the Church and is not something the Church “puts on” to cater for our religious needs and tastes. It is the way appointed by Christ in which the world itself is remembered through the growth of his body.

No doubt the impatience with inherited forms reflects a disappointment with so much church life that many people currently experience. It has always been so. As Origen wrote in the third century “If Jesus had good reason to weep over Jerusalem, he will have much better reason to weep over the church”. The church should be a restorative cell capable of neutralising the cancers that are gnawing at our society but as we know the reality is so often depressingly anaemic. But demolition is no answer.

Andrew Brown, one of the shrewdest commentators on the religious scene in our day, observes that one of the symptoms of extreme hypothermia is the urge to remove all one’s clothes even in a blizzard. Panic is a faithless and fruitless response to the challenge we face. It was not Bill’s response. In remembering him we return with renewed thanksgiving to the life and prayer of an utterly credible priest and witness, Fr Bill.

Jesus said “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world”. We give thanks for the way in which Fr Bill enacted this truth among us day by day. We honour his faithfulness and his profound humanity. We miss his presence and friendship but we rejoice in his intercessions for us now and our future communion with him in the life of the world to come. May light perpetual shine upon him!