

GENTLEMAN

The word that people have used over and over to me about John is '*gentleman*'. There was something in him of old-fashioned courtesy and kindness, humility and thoughtfulness which seem in short supply in our world just at the moment – and for that reason particularly valuable.

I always felt he was a gentleman because he was a Christian, and a Christian because he was a gentleman.

His was a faith that was deep and quiet rather than showy and loud. And we see its strength and beauty in this service today.

GRIEF and SHOCK

Even though it's been a few weeks now,
I am sure that many of us are still in shock.

All death is shocking

But especially when it has been so sudden.

There has been no long withdrawal or decline to help us get used to the idea. Instead a sudden absence, that feels more like a presence.

It is all the more emphatic in the familiar places we expect to see them – I can picture him at the organ over there right now.

It can even feel like drunkenness, because we are no longer able to focus and orientate ourselves. All that held us up, and held us firmly, seems to have been knocked away.

Here at St Michael's, we had said goodbye to John as our Assistant Organist, at the start of the summer. But he was due to be back with us for Michaelmas and also for our Requiem for All Souls this evening. Instead it is the day of his funeral.

John was so popular here that we had to have no less than *two* parties to say goodbye to him! We thanked him for the gift of music, but also for his generosity in every way.

I was struck then, just as I am today, about how much he was loved

I'm sure many of you have a profound sense of incompleteness about all this. Of things left unsaid and undone.

If only I had told him how much he meant to me ...

If only I had thanked him for the time he ...

So we say them now, in this place, in the hope that they are heard.

COMPLEXITY/INCOMPLETENESS

'Life has so many facets' we heard in a poem earlier.

John had not had an easy time in the last few years with Gilly's illness and the changes this brought about in his life.

Life has many facets and it is complicated.

None of us is perfect, and in a service like this we hold before God the complex wonder of a human being like John before the merciful love of God.

We do not need to be perfect to be loved and accepted by God.

We are perfect in our imperfections.

All those loose ends which seem to us untied.

Those many things left unfinished and unsaid.

They are completed in Him who from the Cross spoke the words, '*It is finished*'.

He finishes all that is unfinished for us.

ALL SOULS

It just so happens, that today is All Souls' Day.

That particular time when the Church reminds us of the need to pray for the departed as an act of love towards them.

How very appropriate to be here today, to pray for one loved so much as John.

We do not know exactly what our prayers do for him and for all the departed,
But we do know that we still care for them – and if we still love them we cannot help but pray.

Our loving prayers are a sharing in the heart of God whose seeks the salvation of all his creatures.

This service, like all Christian funerals, is a paradox.

It maintains that death is real and terrible.

It is not slipping into the next room,

Or nothing at all,

As some would have us believe.

It is a moment of spiritual crisis for the dying

And a wounding separation for the living.

Death matters as much as being born.

And though it IS real – it is not the *most real* thing there is.

The greater and greatest reality is **love**.

The love of the human heart is the most real and the most beautiful of all the realities we know. It is the love that joins us together as lovers, friends, family, colleagues and neighbours. Whatever the length of time may be, to have known something of this love is to have experienced the supreme experience of being human.

The Christian faith teaches us that the anguish of parting cannot destroy this most real of all realities. The love that has been, the affection that has existed, the ties that have been woven, the life that has been shared, the joys and the sorrows. This has been as real and as strong as anything in life. And in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ we celebrate that love once born can never die.

So even in the midst of grief and sadness, we can still sing the words of the hymn: *'Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son, Endless is the victory, thou o'er death has won'*.

THE HEAVENLY CITY

We don't know what that life with God is really like – the Bible describes heaven as a city. And that heavenly city is filled with things that John would know and understand.

It is a place of **healing** – a place where *'there is no more death or dying anymore'*.

As a doctor, John had seen a lot of suffering, and he did so much to bring healing to others. In the Gospels, it is the healing ministry of Christ that is the primary sign of the Kingdom of God.

Therefore every healer, every doctor, has a Christ-like, a ministry that anticipates heaven itself.

It is also a place of **music** - where there is *the 'voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters'*, singing hymns before the throne of the Lamb.

As a musician, John helped so many of us to hear that echo of the heavenly choir here on earth. Music is so important for worship, because like a priest at the Altar, it brings together heaven and earth, if even just for a moment.

John knew those tunes, and he sang those songs.

And I see him singing them now, with his own kind smile, as much a gentleman as ever.