

## Requiem Mass for Peter Dawber

By Mgr Patrick Hennessy

The poet Laureate Ted Hughes died on the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1998 and his funeral took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November at North Taunton Church in Devon where he lived. Two months later his memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey, the address being given by his great friend, the Nobel Laureate Poet Seamus Heaney. Heaney described being present at the funeral and being moved to see Hughes' coffin being carried by the handles, as was the custom in that part of Devon, from the church by Hughes' neighbours. What came into his mind he said was the image of the dead King Arthur being carried by the maidens to the barge that would take it to Avalon. Here Heaney is the poet and the story teller telling us what is really going on, who this man was, what his place is in English Literature, language and history – he is a giant, like Arthur was, in the English legend and prehistory. The poet is the interpreter, the one who gives meaning and tells the reality behind events. The priest has a similar role and function.

The Priest is ordained to preach the word of God and gather people round the Eucharistic table. In preaching the word the priest is the poet, story teller and interpreter of life. Life in its joy, light and celebration. Life in its boredom and ordinariness. Life in its awfulness, darkness, tragedy and pain. Life interpreted in the terms of the Christian story that in Jesus God has entered our history, lived the ecstasy and exhilaration of life and experienced the depths of its despair and fear. That in him God has spoken his word and the universe is not deaf to our cries or blind to our tears – in him we have a hope and a future. The priest tries to give meaning and explain the reality behind life's events, in terms of that Christian story and tries to live, however inadequately that faith story in his own life.

I stand before you then this evening as a priest friend of Peter's and like each of you a pilgrim on life's road trying to find meaning and purpose in the Christian story as we consider his life, suffering and death. I want to reflect on Peter's telling of that story and more importantly his living of it in good times and bad which reveals his faith to us. Lastly I want to see what meaning there is for each one of us in the living sermon of his life and death – his legacy for us and future generations.

I had the privilege of preaching at Peter's Silver Jubilee Mass at St Margaret Clitherow's, Threshfield in June 2003 when he was relatively new to the parish. I applied the sentiments of a poem called Singleness by PJ Daley on a priest's life, I said "Your life has indeed been one which scatters people's pain and sorrow and which has brought the children the story of God. The ailing and the sick have felt God's presence when you brought them the Eucharist and the dying have known in you the consolation of God. In your own life and prayer you have experienced the presence of God. The young have known through you the joy of God and the old have found comfort in your life and the small and the wretched have known that you love and care for them. This indeed is what we celebrate on this evening. The fact that for this community and for many others over the past 25 years you have been God's presence, God's story God's compassion". There is nothing in that I would change now except extend the time span to thirty four years. This love for people, his compassion and understanding, his non-judgmental tolerance, his inability to say no because of his sheer kindness – made it easy for us to love him in return.

That was the story of the God of Jesus he told us all, by his life and ministry and those on the margins of life and church flocked to him from all over, as well I know from living at weekends at the Presbytery at St Stephens.

But perhaps the most powerful and eloquent story of God's word that he told was the story of his last years and its cruel journey and of his passion, from the palace of the Roman governor to Golgotha - Calvary. On that way of the cross he was stripped of everything that he cherished – his beloved St Stephen's and St Margaret Clitherow, the exercise of his priesthood which was everything to him, his capacity to walk and control his body, and latterly his capacity to speak and then finally life itself.

Angela Tilby gave a thought for the day in February 2005 as the illness of Pope John Paul II was drawing very publicly to its end. By this time he was voiceless and more or less immobile, only able to wave at the crowds through a hospital window, but Tilby saw in this a very powerful lesson. "The vocation of the Pope, like that of any Christian priest and anyone who tries to follow Jesus Christ is not only about doing things, it is also about patience and passion. We forgot that the root meaning of the word passion is passivity and suffering, the opposite of being in charge".

She quotes a book by WH Varstone called "Stature of Waiting" where he notes that in the earliest gospel, that of Mark, there is a sudden change of gear in the middle of the story. " At the beginning all is action – Jesus is in control, preaching the Kingdom, healing, challenging the powerful. Then as opposition to him mounts, he becomes more passive, the control passes into others hands, he does less, says less until in the end he is simply handed over to his fate. The mystery of the gospel is that this is the point that salvation comes. The saviour saves not by what he achieves but by what he endures. He is not active but passive and his passive passion saves the world.

This says that God does not work only through our strength and ability, but also through our weakness, silence and helplessness. "

Perhaps this is Peter's lesson to us above all. That in the time of his passion through his tears and smiles his faith and faithfulness symbolised for me by his smile and thumbs up when he could no longer speak – in all of this he was never more a Christian and a priest. Like the master, he tried to serve he saves us and himself through powerlessness, suffering and silence.

On the way to Calvary he did not walk alone. Like Jesus he was accompanied by the Marys at the foot of the cross, John the beloved disciple, Simon of Cynere, the Veronica of the Western tradition, the Bernice of the Eastern tradition. They were for him Fr Carlos, his family in Bentham, friends from this parish and previous ones, nurses, doctors, priests and the ongoing prayers of the devoted people that he had served.

So now we thank God for the unique gift that Peter was and is to each of us. We are grateful that he heard the call all those years ago to leave a farm in Bentham on the very frontier of our Diocese. To leave and walk among us as priest and friend telling God's story and living it before us to the day of his death.

Our faith story says that for those who believe in Jesus he is the resurrection and the life. This means that God never stops loving us. We are loved into existence, loved the day we are born,

loved all the days of our life, the day we die, the day after we die and forever. We confidently commit him to that love.

Eamon Duffy, the Cambridge historian in his work "The Voices of Morebath" follows through parish records and accounts, the life of a Parish Priest, a man called Christopher Tryclay who for 54 years (1520 – 1574) was the Parish Priest of a remote Devon parish. He had in his life as a priest experienced all the religious upheaval of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, having lived through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I. In his will he asked to be buried in the Chancel of his parish church and so on the 27th May 1574 they laid him there. He had been their priest for 54 years, for 54 years the heart and the voice, the spirit of Morebath, the chronicler of its dramatic and sometimes tragic share in the religious revolutions of that turbulent age, and the custodian of its blunt attitudes and salt speech. He had baptised their children, buried their dead, married every one of them. He had been the guide of their pieties.

For a little while they would remember him.

The late Elizabethan scribe who copied the register knew that this was a man of note. Against the burial record for the 27th May 1574 he drew a hand with a pointing finger, the only entry distinguished in this way. Perhaps Morebath knew that with Sir Christopher Trychay they had lost something unique and irrecoverable. And that there, between the altar and the table, they had buried something of themselves."

With Peter's death we have lost something unique and irrecoverable and tomorrow will bury something of ourselves.