

Canon John Townroe RIP

Eulogy delivered by Sister Carol CHN at the Funeral Eucharist held at the Minster, Warminster, on Tuesday 31st July 2018.

John hoped that this service would reflect the reality of the Resurrection. His whole life was lived by faith in the resurrection Spirit of Christ always and everywhere at work.

John had three rather older siblings but nevertheless he was, in childhood, often solitary and there developed that contemplative nature which characterised his ministry. But he was a real boy; winning prizes for boxing in his local prep school, racing with his dog Ginger on Hampstead Common; and running, very seriously, the AIB, Automobile Investigation Bureau, from a cupboard at home. Cars were an abiding passion and he may have been the only College principal to drive a Jag (racing green).

Walking back from the parish church when he was 12 John had an experience of God in the Spirit, a warming of the heart, which he remembered always and in which there was the dawning of a priestly vocation. He had a fine mind and could see a number of moves ahead in situations and with human beings.

At 13 he went as a day boy to the Westminster school, travelling by bus and tube in his school uniform - top hat and tails. John enjoyed Westminster, the daily worship at the Abbey, his contacts, classical education, scout group and above all rowing in his pink Westminster jacket. His powers of leadership emerged as he became 'Head of the water'. But racing toward Henley one day he collapsed in the boat with what was then called 'rowers heart'. At 18 he could row no more. Yet that same heart beat for him till he was 98. But he was always dogged with periods of physical exhaustion.

On the brink of the Second World War he went up to St John's College Oxford to read theology. Surprisingly, he was also passed fit for the Fleet Air Arm but in a chance meeting with Archbishop William Temple he was advised to continue with ordination training. We thank God for that. John studied conscientiously and lecture notes still exist in his clear attractive hand. But he found time to be head of the Junior Common Room, to lead the Oxford Student Christian Movement for a year, as well as doing war-time fire watching and leading groups of men to chop timber in Bagley wood.

The years of austerity continued at Lincoln Theological College where leadership qualities continued to develop and where his physical and nervous frailty/sensitivity was also evident together with a notable spiritual maturity. Ordained in '43 and '44 in Durham Cathedral, he served his title in the parish of the Good Shepherd in Sunderland. This was an impoverished estate where he shared a council house with two other members of the company of mission priests. It was a far cry from the leafy avenues of Hampstead and his loved Grandmother's gracious home in Dedham where he spent much time. But he retained a great affection for the place and the people. It was a street-wise and rather gaunt young man who emerged from those immediate post-war years.

His intention was to continue work among the poor but in '48 he was called, no other word for it, to be chaplain to the new venture here in Warminster. Ordinands from King's College London were to have a fourth year of experience in preaching, pastoralia, mission, devotional discipline and community living. John spent six years living in the college and then, on becoming warden, moved across the drive where he became affectionately known as Blessed John of the Lodge. This was humorous but there was a true perception here. People often commented that there was 'something about John', something indefinable. It was his God-centredness, a holiness, a

purity of heart. His was a dedicated life, from an early age, given to God who was his All and to other people. His life was centred in the eternal; his feet incarnationally on the ground.

His gifts were exactly suited to the college work; the teaching, the spiritual leadership of a community and an extraordinary perception about human beings. He had a quiet authority about him. He could also be funny, which not all discovered, and he loved his students. 1005 men came under his influence in his 21 years. It was hard work for him and three times in his life John's health broke under the strains of ministry. There was a loneliness. From these times of suffering came his empathy, compassion, strength and wisdom for others.

The closure of the college in '69 was a wounding, traumatic time but, mercifully for many of us, there opened a wider and specialised ministry as a speaker, retreat giver and spiritual director. And not just in England. John went for three extended periods as visiting 'professor' to St Bernard's seminary in Rochester New York where he was greatly appreciated and loved and abiding friendships were made. He refused the offer of a full-time job, however, as his allegiance was to the Anglican church which he loved and the best of which he somehow epitomised.

When in '75 he gave a seven-day retreat in my own community I recognised a spiritual master, in the great tradition but with contemporary relevance. The addresses were profound, lucid, pragmatic, life-changing and so clearly under the authority of the Lord the Spirit. And all in that lovely voice and delivery which any actor might envy. To the end of his life John could still speak off the cuff, to the point and with unusual insight.

The number of people coming to him for help and counsel increased. He was director to the SSF in Dorset and to the SSJE in Oxford and London. His work as director was marked by the same quiet authority, listening attentiveness, truthful clarity, empathetic imagination and pragmatism; and risk. He worked to liberate people as children of God. Human behaviour did not surprise him. He was a true father in God with a most affectionate heart; a sweetness of disposition. If he said he would pray for you he really did so. I think there are a lot of people who would testify that he rescued them in times of crisis or distress. As one said, 'it will be difficult to be in a world without John'. And so, for some of us it will be.

John lived at risk on many levels. Growing up in the period between two wars he experienced a prevailing cynicism and practised his faith against the odds. He risked not having a paid full-time job after the college closed, and God saw him through. He spent little on himself (Jaguars apart) and took little thought for his future ... and God saw him through. He had a great discipline of mind and practice. He disliked gossip and trained himself to go with the goodnesses in people and around him as an act of faith in God's redemptive work. He pursued the affirmative way. Despite a keen critical faculty he did not disparage. I have almost never heard him speak negatively. As one said, he made people better by who he was.

John's last years (and more especially last months) were marked by ill health, and very real pain, suffering and limitation - but his sweetness of disposition came through increasingly. He did not complain but was patient, if occasionally wistful. He longed to get out and walk again. It was a privilege to look after him. We owe a debt of gratitude to the band of carers who loved and respected him. He was deeply affectionate and sensitive, highly imaginative ... a dear dear man as some have said, a most loving and loveable man. One of my religious sisters hoped this service would be full of thanksgiving for a beautiful life. It was a beautiful life. He was/is a beautiful person, a rare bird. Oh, we will miss you John and we thank you for all you gave us. An era passes with you and we may not see your like again.

Time to end with the tale of the two trees. Two chestnut trees were planted when John came to the college. Then a great storm, a Sou-Wester, blew up and almost destroyed one of the two

saplings. A decision was made to leave it, give it a chance, and in due course that tree recovered. The trunk grew around the wound where it had been snapped and in fact it became bigger, stronger and finer than the tree that had suffered no damage. This is a parable for all our lives as it certainly was for John's. God's transfiguring spirit and love in Christ always and everywhere at work ... until the gates of death open and we know the reality of the resurrection in fullness of joy. May dearest John's joy abound. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.