

In memory of Canon Tom Thompson

Romans 12.9-16 and John 14.1-14

I am deeply sorry not to be with you today but Jon, Richard and Rachel, and you all, will be much in my prayers in Norwich where I will be sitting quietly in the Cathedral during this hour.

On the eve of my ordination to the priesthood, Tom gave me a book of ancient quotes from the early theologians of the Church. He had found it useful himself, sitting early each morning reflecting quietly on the passage set for the day. Inside the front cover, in his distinctive black fountain pen writing, he wrote, 'remember 2 Corinthians 4.5.'

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.'

That was 'very Tom'. I imagine that is also why Tom asked that this sermon must not be about him. He wanted it to be about the love and hope that we find in Christ. I'm only going to disobey him a little; just as much as a former curate can get away with! Why? Because I think today can be a day of thanksgiving for the love and hope that we experienced in Tom's life in ways that proclaimed Christ.

Our two readings have spoken of love and hope. In the reading from Romans Paul offers a beautiful poetic reflection about how love reaches for the common good in the Church and in society. Affection, positivity, patience, hospitality are all ways in which we live out that love, as are those times when we bless even those who make life difficult for us, and when we build

communities of care. And, also, when we have a genuine humility about ourselves.

It strikes me, as it does his children, that this passage was one that Tom tried to live out each day. Many of us have appreciated his affection, especially Jon, Richard and Rachel and their families. He was proud of his children and grandchildren. He had loving friendships, not least in recent years through his companionship with Joan. He built up communities of care in Chorley, Barrowford, Northfield, Longton and Nunthorpe. And he was patient, wise and gentle; slowly teaching people, often illustrating sermons with children's stories. He guided difficult PCCs from any tendency to persecution! He looked for the positive, even when the Church he served did silly things, and he had a beauty of humility about him. All was wrapped in his daily offering of prayer.

He and Mary, who he adored and who was a solid support, warmly welcomed people into their homes, not least curates for breakfast every Sunday morning between services. In fact, he so trusted Mary that she interviewed me – whilst picking raspberries! He could be something of an innocent abroad at times and you had to spell out certain things to him. Early on, I didn't dare ask him if I could have a Sunday off for my stag weekend, and he didn't think to offer even though Richard was part of it, so I'm one of the few grooms who left his stag weekend early to return to the parish for Sunday services!

St Paul's words in Romans to bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse, sound a lot like what Jesus said. What Paul is hinting at throughout

this chapter is that to love genuinely is to love as Jesus loved. Jesus is our example for how we live together in love as individuals and as a community. Like him, 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep'. You see, when we show love toward someone, we are moving them toward God's goodness; as we love, so the other might just by illuminated with the light of God's goodness.

Tom knew that one day he would be enfolded in that goodness completely. He had believed that for Mary, choosing for her funeral another passage from Romans which speaks of being convinced that death does not separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Tom now enjoys the many-roomed mansion of the Lord's house where a place has been prepared for him. Those words of Jesus in John's Gospel convey such gentleness and thoughtfulness. What hope they have! Tom liked that image of many rooms because, for him, it spoke of inclusion. His was a theology that was broad, enveloping, tolerant, seeking always to build bridges - something that he did in each of the four deaneries where he served as rural dean. Bishops and other clergy trusted his judgement. The Bishop of Carlisle sent some quotes from Tom's file where various bishops have described Tom's ministry as 'a real asset to the diocese' and of 'sterling service,' and his character as 'dependable, balanced, statesmanlike and well-organised, with a warm personality'. They knew him well. Entrusted with a steady stream of curates, they learnt much from him, and from Mary, and I'm grateful for the excellent foundations for ministry that he instilled in me.

John's Gospel speaks of those who see, hear and touch Jesus. Tom lived that. He knew that in a ministry of compassion, love, service and humility he was patterning his life after Christ. He had responded to Jesus' invitation to draw near and little by little he would glimpse more of the Father, holding the hope that in death he would see face to face the maker of the universe. That's the journey that every Christian pilgrim is called to make.

Tom would have had a smile on this face to know that the day of his funeral is St Cuthbert's Day. The great saints of the Northeast - Bede and Aidan, Cuthbert and Hilda - had inspired him since his days as a student in Durham.

It was said of Cuthbert:

"What man the wondrous gifts of God shall tell?

What ear the joys of paradise shall hear?

Triumphant o'er the gates of death and hell,

The just shall live amid the starry sphere."

Those ancient words bring us comfort as we remember Tom with thanksgiving; a faithful soul, carved out by God from the Lancashire grit of his birth, who now enjoys the starry sphere of the hope and love of Christ in full clarity and for all eternity.

God bless you Tom, and thank you.

+Graham Norvic:

Bishop of Norwich