

## Dad funeral tribute – 26.06.23

I'd like to begin by thanking everyone for being here today, as we remember Vernon (my Dad). But first, some special words of thanks.

First to the consultants and medical staff of the Great Western Hospital Swindon, the Churchill Hospital Oxford, and the team of community nurses, who at various times over the past 40 years looked after Dad and helped him live with a complex assortment of serious medical conditions. Their commitment and skill meant that, despite his first contracting cancer in the 1980s, Dad lived until the age of 90 – and we are all so thankful for that.

Then I'd like to thank everyone—many of you from this church congregation—who has supported mum and Dad during Dad's final years. Your friendship and care for them both has been quite wonderful: it has been love in action. You have enabled them to live to the fullest extent possible within their limitations – whether that has been by doing shopping, taking mum to visit Dad, or simply checking up to see that they were OK. Thank you.

I'd like also to thank the staff of Goatacre Manor Care Centre who looked after Dad during his final months with such a rare combination of professionalism and genuine compassion. Dad was so glad to have been able to end his days with you, as indeed were we all. In those final days, as we gathered as members of the family around his bedside, we also experienced the depth of your care. Thank you.

And then, I must thank my Mum, Yvonne, for her phenomenal, sacrificial care of Dad in his final years. From about 2017, Dad was seldom able to leave the house. From that point on, Mum dedicated her whole life to looking after him. Until this time last year, she managed to do that at home. Then, when Dad moved into residential care, Mum visited every day, and would also talk with him on the phone several times each day: keeping him connected with the world beyond. Thank you, Mum.

We've included a short biographical note in the Order of Service, so what I'm not going to do is run through Dad's life year by year – you can read that for yourselves! What I *would* like to do, though, is to offer some personal reflections on Dad's life and to pay tribute to someone we all knew to be a very, very special man who had a great impact on so many.

Dad has left a living legacy in the lives of all those with whom he interacted over the years, whether it was:

- his students at Withernsea High School, Hreed Burna or at New College, Swindon
- anyone who encountered his preaching in the churches and chapels of East Yorkshire and North Wiltshire
- those he led in bible study and home groups over the years
- the staff at Goatacre Manor to whom he listened and with whom he prayed
- and, of course, his family.

Most of us here today will fall into one or other of these groups. We will all have our own memories of Vernon—of Dad.

One memory I have is from a holiday in the Yorkshire Dales when I was 8. At the time I was totally obsessed by every aspect of railways and my idea of a family holiday was that we should spend as much time as possible on station platforms and in signalboxes! One morning, I woke up in the place where we were staying to find on the breakfast table a beautiful hand-drawn scale map of the railways of North-West England. While I had been asleep, Dad had been busy, drawing all the lines and stations of that part of the world, together with their main features: stations, tunnels and viaducts, as well, of course, as the most notable geographical features – he was always the teacher! In fact, Dad taught me the skill of map-reading very early on: something for which I've been eternally grateful.

Another memory which will always stay with me is from my early teens. Many of us here will remember Dad's piano accordion playing (which was put to such good use in church and in outdoor worship), but in the 1970s as I started to learn to play various instruments, we would play together. Dad would play the piano accompaniments for my Associated Board exam pieces, and we would play trombone, cello, clarinet and piano together – at home, and in church. And then, near Christmas, the ensemble would expand when we visited my cousins Sarah, Amanda and Lucy.

Whatever it was that Dad was involved in, he always had immense enthusiasm for his subject. Get him going on land formations, on geology, palaeontology, ornithology or theology and he was in his element – the natural teacher. The natural world was for him a source of endless fascination, joy and delight. In retirement he combined his formidable knowledge of nature with a growing interest and skill in photography. His collection of exquisite bird, butterfly and dragonfly photographs are utterly breathtaking: being a delight to look at, but also a valuable scientific record – as he looked with the 'eye of the naturalist' through the camera's lens.

As I was growing up, Dad really did his best to pass on his wonder at the natural world to the next generations. Growing up, we often went for walks, sometimes with geological hammer in hand, as we combed the abandoned lead mines of the north east for mineral specimens. He sometimes joked that in my case, he had failed to turn me into a naturalist! But in his latter years, Dad passed on his camera and binoculars to Heather and me, and through this we were able to appreciate more fully the phenomenal wildlife of the Outer Hebrides where we live. His picture of the turtle dove, which is on the screen at the moment, is greatly loved by Heather; and it was having seen and known this picture on the wall in Mum and Dad's house, that she was able to identify one in our garden in Stornoway, and so record only the third ever sighting of an oriental turtle dove in Scotland.

His enthusiasm was shared, too, with his grandsons, Thomas and David. Thomas recalls enjoying trips with his Nanna and Granddad to the bird reserve at Slimbridge – of being given pots of food with which to feed the birds – and of visits to the gravel pits near Ashton Keynes, hunting for fossils. David has happy memories of visiting Avebury Stone Circle and West Kennet Long Barrow – and he ended up an archaeologist! Things didn't always go according to plan, however - even the best geographers can lose their way! On one occasion, when mum and Dad were visiting us in Ely, they took Thomas and David for a day's walk in Thetford Forest. Towards the end of the day, Heather and I were awaiting their return, but the hours went by, and it was well into the evening before they appeared. It transpired that they had got lost, and in the end had been taken back to the car park by a friendly ranger they'd happened to meet somewhere in the depths of the forest. Dad told us that the Forestry Commission had removed all the signs..... well, at least that's what he *said*! David was also intrigued by Dad's insistence on hoarding vast numbers of boxes of cornflakes or shredded wheat. Dad always went for the bargain – and I must say, that does live on into the next generation!

Dad was a great support to me as I extended my studies. Throughout my teens, he and mum enabled me to take part in many courses, broadening my experience and leading to my learning to play the organ, and taking a music degree. And, after that, that support continued: into work, buying a first house, my marriage to Heather, ordination and the birth and growth of our sons, Thomas and David, and their children: Micah, Tabitha and Penny.

Dad was a fount of knowledge in many areas but, much more than that, I learned from him something of what it is to be human. He was a living example: of how to treat others: women and men—of any background—with respect and honour; how to be generous and non-judgemental, even with those with whom we disagree.

Underpinning all this was Dad's strong Christian faith. Not having been brought up in a churchgoing household, he came to faith in his late teens, and it was this faith which sustained him throughout his life, including his long period of ill-health from his 50s onwards.

Dad's faith isn't a separate category – it's not a separate box which sits alongside his teaching, or his interest in nature or music, or even his character – but it was the foundation of everything else; it enabled him to become fully the person he had been created to be. For Dad, faith found was faith to be shared—shared in over 50 years of public ministry and personal witness: making known to others what he himself had discovered – very simply, that God, in Jesus Christ, made us, loves us, and gives us purpose and hope in this life and the next.

Now not everyone will be aware of this, but the day on which Dad died—11 June—is St Barnabas' Day in the Church's calendar. Barnabas was one of the key figures in the generation after Jesus, a companion of St Paul. His name, though, has a meaning: it means 'son of encouragement.' And what better day than St Barnabas' day for us to remember Vernon: a faithful encourager in his own day, who enabled so many others to flourish.

Just over 30 years ago, in 1993, when this church celebrated the completion of its redevelopment project, Dad preached at the thanksgiving service. And his subject was 'Barnabas: son of encouragement.' He made 3 main points (all his sermons had 3 points!), and they were, in brief:

- don't mistrust the outsider,
- build up people in their faith, and
- never write people off – always give them a second chance.

The overlap between Barnabas and Dad is interesting, isn't it. I suspect they'll have a great deal to talk about as they spend eternity together! St Luke wrote of Barnabas, that he was 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' And, hand on heart, we can say that too about Dad—about Vernon.

No tribute to Dad would be complete without something musical. Some years ago, before he lost the sensation in his hands and feet, he recorded several of the pieces he so much enjoyed playing. Let's listen now, to *A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square*, as we remember him with joy and gratitude, giving thanks for all that he will always mean to each of us.

[PLAY SOUND FILE]