

A Sermon preached at the Parish Church of St Giles the Abbot, Farnborough, Kent on Sunday June 26th 2022 being the Rush sermon and the commemoration of the death of the Reverend Graham Shaw, a former Rector of the parish.

For the parish of Farnborough, and the many friends of Graham Shaw.

Graham Shaw could hardly be more fitly remembered before God than through the medium of Farnborough's Rush sermon, which is to be preached annually in this church on the subject of the transience of life. That title itself recalls the period when sermons were less about presenting faith to a sceptical age, and more about how to equip and strengthen the soul for Christian living among the changes and chances of this fleeting world. Part of Graham's distaste for the present day Church of England arose from his being personally rooted in those older verities. If he felt dislocated from the policies and mission statements of today's bishops in synod, it was because he believed they were failing in steadfast regard for the heart of the matter. Which, if my own understanding of Graham is correct, how the eternal God engages with our human existences and offers to those who ask to be transformed into God's own holy life.

Graham's very demeanour conveyed inward self-assurance, comprehension and control. I remember how at Cuddesdon college, where we students were trained for the sacred ministry, after the college had gathered to say morning prayer there was a half hour for meditation. We filled it in various ways, some of them deeply pious. Graham filled the time reading, no doubt searchingly and carefully, not a biblical book or a devotional classic, but in a finely bound tome of the classical philosopher Epictetus. We noticed (as we were meant to) were suitably impressed.

We recognized our fellow student as one who knew how to furnish his life well, and to defend himself against intruders by overawing them. He was even more effectively defended by his formidable personal presence, because he had all the confidence of a former Head of School at Rugby, who had a sharp eye for an opponent's weak argument and a poise and forcefulness worthy of anyone's respect. He was also, as parishioners would later find, diligent in administration, systematic in his study and operations, and winningly gracious to his allies. Graham offered himself for ordination on his own terms, and his later life-decisions were rooted in the processes of his character.

That is why Graham has remained so valued and mourned a person to the many who have shared any part of his life. He was one who gathered, not discarded, what he loved. He was, for example, always loyal to the clergy cell which nine of us brought into being before we left Cuddesdon College in 1969. So it meant that we enjoyed his insights over many years and through many ups and downs. For all the changes of his career, he was, to our eyes, ever the same. He seemed to have sprung fully armed like Pallas Athene, bristling for combat against wilful ignorance, insolence, and injustice. And so he ever remained through life's transience.

At Cuddesdon, Robert Runcie mingled satire with respect in speaking of Graham's 'leather-bound piety'. But he wisely dispatched such a star of Oxford's scholarship in divinity, Ellerton Prizewinner, pupil of Alec Graham, to Princeton in order that the United States too should know the quality of the day's Anglican ordinands. Graham produced a treatment of the American theologian John Knox which, as he elucidated it for me on our walks down the lane to the mill not far from Cuddesdon, struck me as merciless; a forerunner of the scouring treatment which Graham was to mete out to St Paul when he eventually put the great apostle in the dock.

For Graham's insistence on the truth behind truth, coupled with his ability to organise a forensic charge, which he then delivered with such energy and fire of judgment, was in danger of leaving nothing standing. We wondered if we were watching the rebellion of an apostate, an avenging theologian with a flame thrower.

But then at one of our Cell meetings some 20 or more years ago, Graham appeared among us in a cassock and a clerical collar while we loafed about in jerseys and jeans. He celebrated the Holy Communion (Prayer Book 1662) with his usual solemnity, and he read the Pauline epistle for the day as if he had forgiven St Paul's failings. For Graham had not abandoned faith. His swimming in The Sea of Faith had rather caused him to uncover truth than rejoice in their being drowned. The plainness of Quaker worship was by now providing the medium by which he could enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit unimpeded by talkativeness and fretful indignation. The many things Graham loved survived the bonfire of vanities that he knew well how to light. He had found, maybe, how much the soul of Graham Shaw was like the loyal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob whose covenant with creation outlasts his frustration with the blindness and errors of the chosen people.

For we found in Graham a man who was also loyal and tender, wise and steadfast. He never lost his love for places, for things of beauty, for the human works of the past which are worth preserving, and for his fellow inhabitants of the world. Graham chose the second lesson tonight to be what we heard: the words of encouragement spoken by Jesus to the penitent thief on the next cross at Calvary. As Jesus, in his own extremity had been sensitive to the needs of this poor man, so Graham seemed by his nature to sense the needs of parishioners, students, the holy and the unholy, those wronged by prejudice and injustice. He beheld them (he

beheld us, he beheld himself) in the light of divine charity. The mercy of a warm heart was joined with the clear sighted and unflinching justice and the courage to put love first.

You felt this in his delivery of formal liturgy and the urgent prose of his words in the pulpit, where he was magnificent. We of his cell remember an evensong at Exeter college where he used the long abolished Prayer Book service for the Commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot. We quaked, but not with anti Papist sentiment. He conveyed, as an historian, the terror of our ancestors, their horror at the transience and fragility of life, the longing for grace to save us. It was not a performance to show off his histrionic talent; it reflected Graham's awe at the perpetual issues which underlie our mortality. Even the finest and loveliest of created things has its day. But the word of the Lord stands for ever against the transience of things, and the undying word is of love.

But Graham would have the last word. His verdict would be delivered with a little laugh towards the preacher: "That's very, very naughty!" he would say. And that would be all right.

Keith Jones

Dean Emeritus of York