

St John the Evangelist, Upper St Leonard's-on-Sea
8th February 2023

IN MEMORIAM DAVID FENTIMAN

'Hello,' said Andrew. 'I run a young marrieds group with my wife Philippa; we wondered if you'd like to join us.' And that's how Helen and I met David and Barbara at St Nicholas, Sutton, in 1971, and over the following 52 years we've remained good friends. I was ordained ten years later, and we were delighted, but not surprised, when David took the same path. He invited me to preach at his ordination, but it was on the same day as I had a commitment I couldn't break, and so I had to decline. I'd love to have done it, and was very sad that I could not, so it is special for me to be able to pay tribute to him today.

Henri Nouwen, a priest and spiritual guide, said the priest is called to be a living reminder – a living reminder of that greater reality in which, as St Paul said, 'we live and move and have our being' (*Acts 17.28*). Nouwen believed 'the great vocation of the minister is to make connections between the human story and the divine story.' (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder*) The priest is not sent as the one with the answers, but as a living reminder of the living hope into which we are born. In the Eucharist especially, at which the priest alone is privileged to preside, we recall the memories of Jesus without which there is no hope. In memory of Jesus we preach, we teach, we heal and we break bread together. Through his gifts of his broken body and blood outpoured we find the grace to bring the love and light of God into a confused culture, a fractured society, and a dark world. I think that describes David's ministry. Although he often expressed a deeply felt outrage with much in the Church and the world, he was never without hope.

Julian of Norwich, the great fourteenth century English mystic, expressed the Christian hope beautifully and simply: 'From God we come, in him we are enfolded, to him we shall return. We shall find in

him our whole heaven in everlasting joy.' 'God is the goodness that can know no anger,' she said. He looks on his servants 'with pity not with blame'.

Julian literally saw this truth in the course of a series of visions when she lay ill and close to death on 8th May 1373. She recovered and wrote them down in the first book known to have been written by a woman in English. *Revelations of Divine Love* is notable for the loving picture it paints of God in sharp contrast to the more typical medieval pictures of divine wrath and the pains of hell. Julian saw nothing but love in God: 'Woulds't thou know the Lord's meaning in this thing?' she asked; 'Know it well. Love is his meaning.'

The priest, with all the People of God, is called to be a living reminder of the love that enfolds us and sustains us. And if God is love, we can hope that death is not a descent into nothingness, but an ascent into fullness. We know from our human experience of love that true love never lets us go, whatever we do; so likewise divine love will never abandon us, whatever befalls us. In the love of God we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and if God is love he cannot have made us only to see us perish for ever. As Julian understood, 'From him we come, in him we are enfolded, to him we shall return.' She echoes the words of Jesus: 'It is my Father's will that everyone who sees the Son and has faith in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day' (*John 6.40*). It is this faith in which David lived and died. Celebrating his life is also to celebrate his faith; they were inseparable; to celebrate the life without the faith is not to celebrate the man.

There are times, though, when it's hard to make connections between the human story and the divine story, when God seems no longer close and faith is challenged – times of suffering, loss and grief. The weeks before Christmas were such a time for David, a time when he was more aware of the absence of God than the presence of God. Times when hope is not so real are hard to bear, and the questions we all carry in our hearts well up in our minds: Where did we come from?

Where are we going? Why does life have to end this way? Where's the meaning? Where's the justice?

It seems to me that these times are an inevitable part of being human; we are vulnerable creatures and human striving is precarious. We couldn't feel grief if we couldn't feel love; we couldn't feel loss if we couldn't feel joy. Jesus too experienced the absence of God as he cried out on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' In crushing anguish he felt only the absence of God. He no longer felt the closeness to the Father that had sustained his life. But God *was* there, and Jesus *was* raised to new life. And in times of testing God is there for us also. Again Julian speaks to us over the centuries: 'He did not say, "You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work weary, you shall not be discomforted". But he did say, "You shall not be overcome".' And again Julian echoes the words of Jesus, 'All that the father gives to me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never turn away' (*John 6.37*).

The silence of God does not mean the absence of God; it is rather an invitation to trust. At the Last Supper, when the disciples were overwhelmed with feelings of grief and fear, and their faith was on the line, Jesus simply invited them to trust: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled' he said. 'Trust in God always; trust also in me.' (*John 14.1*) In a materialistic age, when we put our trust in things we can weigh and measure, this may fail to convince. But we know there's more to life than material reality, and for me, growing older has brought the realisation that not every question has an answer, and this seems to be true most of all of our deepest questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and about its ending.

I've learnt also that it's not so much what we *believe about* the love that enfolds us that's important, but whether we have learned to *trust* that love. Have we learnt from the experience of our close and loving relationships – the loving experiences of which Clare, Anna and Paula spoke so movingly – have we learnt that they point to the mystery at

the heart of life? Do we take them only at face value, or do we reflect on where they point? The answer was given to Julian in her visions. The mystery to which they point is God, the ground of our being, and the source of our hope. She put it beautifully: 'God is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love, and he will never let us go.' As we celebrate David, may God lead us to trust in that love as he did.

And so to that divine love we commend David, husband, father, friend and brother:

Farewell, David, dear friend. May you find your eternal home in the love that created you and enfolds you, and will never let you go!

Amen.

Peter Sills
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God is our clothing. In his love he wraps and holds us. He enfolds us for love, and he will never let us go.

I saw that he is to us everything that is good. He loves us and enjoys us, and so he wills that we love him and enjoy him, and firmly trust him, and all shall be well.

We shall see God face to face, simply and wholly. From him we come, in him we are enfolded, to him we shall return. We shall find in him our whole heaven in everlasting joy.

Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love