

TRIBUTE - ARNOLD HIRST – 29th MAY, 2007

One of those incidents in Arnold's adventurous life occurred quite recently and he relished telling it. He was in Winchester Cathedral to hear Brahms's Requiem, very ill and under strict instructions from his doctor to wear a hat to keep him warm. He was a little early and so he would enjoy browsing around the building. He was spotted by a guide, one of those delightful members of our faith who seem to believe that all we have to share is guilt. Arnold made a valiant attempt to ignore her as she made ever more frantic efforts to point to his hat. Eventually she caught up with the party and Arnold explained not only why he was wearing a hat, but that he was a priest, who like the greats of old, Lancelot Andrews and Soapy Sam Wilberforce, had preached from the pulpit in the Cathedral when he had been chaplain to the Lord Mayor of Winchester. He was then accused of deceiving her because he did not have his dog collar on. That was too much for Arnold and he launched into a lecture on how ludicrous it was that anyone should think that a priest was only recognisable because he had part of a Fairy Liquid bottle tucked under his collar.

No one could tell the story like Arnold, not only because we can't quite get the "Holy Mackerels" and "Oh my flogging Aunt" in the right places. But because we haven't his vitality and enthusiasm for life. I think I shall most miss laughing till I cried as he recounted some pretty normal parish experience with that intensity and bewilderment that transformed the ordinary into an exciting and hilarious adventure. Whether it was a Tilley hat, or the ride in a helicopter for a meeting in London, or parish problems, he was able to enliven the story and make his many friends laugh.

But there were two other aspects of his life which the story illustrates. The first is that communication mattered to him, and particularly his understanding of truth. He did not mind whether or not people differed from him in their understanding or experience, but he wanted to make ensure that they knew where he was coming from and how passionate he was about his beliefs. He would spend precious hours on his sermons and on the parish magazine so that he could pass on something of his exuberance and intensity for living. The second is that once he had been pressed he was a fighter and he would not let anyone walk all over him - not the South African Government and its unjust laws. He and Archbishop Tutu always had a bit of banter when they met and talked about the protest in which they were involved and at which they were arrested. Desmond remembers how when Arnold was asked his named, he replied, "Hirst as in Thirst". Arnold reminded Desmond that they had shared a bed. He was a good cricketer and a first league squash player and would always wanted to enjoy a real contest but he would never go down without a fight, and the same was true in parish life. He would listen and argue, but would never lamely capitulate.

He and Jill were married shortly before he was ordained deacon 47 years ago. They were partners in a shared . They were a perfect foil. Jilly always calm, gentle, practical, a wonderful listener. Inevitably the last months will always loom large in their lives as will their gratitude for the generosity of friends which made it possible for their family to spend so much time together. They gathered in France and had a memorable weekend. The return trip on the ferry was stormy and a disaster. Everyone was being violently ill – Arnold only queesy – but as all fell around her Jill became increasingly perky. It was typical that the more demanding any occasion the more Jill would rise to the challenge. They were wonderful parents and whatever the demands of the job always shared it together with unfailing hospitality to people from all walks of life , in their joys and sorrows. But there were special times together which Catherine, Stephen and Judith Anne will always cherish, sailing in Durban harbour, climbing mountains or a never to be forgotten BBQ when the flames threatened to make lunch a whole burnt offering and Arnold decided to douse the flames with paraffin instead of water. Life was always full of exuberance and

never dull. And his grandchildren were special to them both. Arnold was never granddad or grandpa. He was simply Arnold – to AJ Arndold - a valued friend and fellow traveller and a fun person. He always said he never wanted to be old, and his vitality never failed him right to the end. Always unpredictable he had taught all the children the penny whistle song well known in the townships of S. Africa, and a dance to accompany the music, and even when Catherine and David's boys were teenagers he would suddenly line them up at home or in some shopping mall and go into the sequence, laughing and unembarrassed. One of them now has the song as a ring tone on his mobile phone.

He was a priest for 47 years, 45 of which were in full time parish ministry. He belonged to the school which said that a parish priest's place was in the parish and alongside the people that he was entrusted to care for and humanly speaking he did everything he could to be with them when they needed him. It was typical that he preached and celebrated for the last time less than three weeks ago, and preached a memorable sermon at the funeral of a young father, whom he had married and whose children he had baptised, tragically killed in a motor accident within a week of his own death. He was endlessly available and determined not to short change anyone. He was disciplined in his prayers, and kept up his reading to be aware of ways in which he might enhance his ministry, be more effective in serving God's people and preach in words and concepts that could be understood. And there was something prophetic about the insights he had and which he wanted the church to take to heart. He was faithful in attending meetings, but not at his best and not uncomplaining about the growing proliferation of meetings that the church thinks necessary for its well-being.

He had a great gift for friendship. His grandsons tell of his visits to Canada and how he would get to know their friends and talk to anybody. He really valued people and so many of you both here and in many different parts of the world have responded to him. I think that ideally he would have liked every member of his parishes to think of him as a friend and was always restless and puzzled when opposition or antagonism arose. I can't help hoping that the picture of heaven drawn by Austen Farrer is going to be true and that Arnold will have its full benefit : "O what heaven to be in heaven

And see on every side the glory of God reflected in the image of God which is the human face! What heaven to be in heaven and to delight without a barrier in the company of a thousand friends when all reserves are down and all hearts are open and we shall care for the handiwork of God impartially whether it happens to be in another or in ourselves."

We owe much to Arnold and we shall miss his zest, his vitality and his humour, his years of untiring ministry. We are grateful to him and to God. For him the night is past and the day lies open. For all of us, as Stephen expressed it, he was like a shooting star, bright, dazzling, but a little short-lived. I end with a toast to Arnold which his family found and which all of us could make when he lift our cups later, in gratitude for his full and adventurous life:

If faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
The conviction of things not seen,
We have the courage to believe today
Because we have seen you
Live, dream, work, play and
Love without limit.

*Ted Goodyer
Alverstoke*