

Homily at the Funeral of Richard Bentley
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
18 May 2019

When I was at school, most students were confirmed aged 13. It was a church school. It was also a private school. Richard of course had strong views about church schools and private schools! Happily for me, Richard was deeply tolerant and forgiving.

Confirmation classes at my school were traditional. The one thing I do remember is the definition of a sacrament. “A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” That, I think, is a beautiful description of Richard. “An outward...”

Richard was a sacrament. The sacraments we know: baptism, communion, marriage and so on. These things Richard administered as a priest. But Richard himself was a sacrament: a channel of God’s grace and blessing. Richard was special, yes very special. But notice that we are all sacraments. We are all channels of God’s grace and blessing. Through love, through kindness, through compassion, through humility, through self-deprecating humour, through prioritising the poor and the marginalised. What was especially evident in Richard is true for us all.

Jean Vanier founded L’Arche communities – houses where the so-called able and disabled live together as equals. These are places where the disabled discover the dignity of being treated as human, and the able discover that there is an intrinsic worth to humanity that is nothing to do with ability or achievement. That insight helped me make sense of how Richard’s health deteriorated so radically with Motor Neurone Disease. I don’t mean there is an explanation for such a cruel end of life. I mean see some truth, find some meaning in his physical reduction. So many people saw in Richard, that despite his physical decline, his emotional and spiritual health remained strong. It is important to be honest about the challenges and the strain of serious illness. But Richard’s emotional and spiritual strength became more evident, they shone as his body failed. Grace and goodness, kindness and love radiated from his failing body.

The great Trevor Huddleston knew Richard and Penny, Sam, Tom and Joe in the east end of London. Trevor Huddleston was Bishop of Stepney and a friend of the family. Before Stepney, Bishop Huddleston lived in South Africa and was one of the great leaders in the anti-apartheid movement. He said this about the birth of Jesus: “God himself has entered this world, has been ‘enfleshed’ in our common humanity and has therefore given to every person an infinite and changeless dignity.” God has given to every person an infinite and changeless dignity. This humanity shone through Richard and his life, through his ministry and his inclusivity.

Richard’s calm and peace, Richard’s gentleness and humility flowed from him knowing his own value, as a human being, a child of God. Richard’s support for the marginalised, for the victims of how society is ordered, his support for them flowed from him knowing the value of all people, as human beings, as children of God.

It was Richard’s belief in the equal value and dignity of all people that fuelled his opposition to church schools and private schools. It was Richard’s belief in the equal value and dignity of all people that fuelled his campaigning for justice. Notice how minority groups are represented at his funeral – minorities whose status in the church changed radically in Richard’s lifetime – and changed radically thanks to the commitment of people like Richard. Notice and rejoice: a women’s choir - alleluia! a female priest - alleluia! a gay Dean - alleluia!

Listen to the Word of God in the Gospel of Luke.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then he began to say to them,

‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

Dear friends, in Richard: husband, brother-in-law, friend, father, father-in-law, grandfather, priest, pastor, prophet, child of God, sacrament; in Richard this scripture has been fulfilled. Thanks be to God.

Canon Matthew Vernon

Canon Pastor & Sub Dean