

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



A Thanksgiving Service for the life of Ronald Blythe
Wednesday 1 March 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Akenfield was my introduction to Suffolk. Judging by the date in the front of my copy, 1972, I must have read it as a young undergraduate, while at a university in the next county over. It would be decades before I would actually visit this county, and still more before I moved here and fell in love with her, but Akenfield, the taste and sight and sound of that village's life, had stayed with me and, I now realise through Ronnie's prose, with a touch of home about it.

It is that touch of home that I think touches us, and has touched countless people through Ronnie's writings over the many decades. Though he may be describing scenes and moments very different from our own experience, somehow he made them feel familiar, a place we would want to be, where such things happen. And home for Ronnie, as Julia has alluded, was just where he found himself to be.

I met him for the first time, in the early 1990s, at a gathering in Cambridge of Readers serving in churches across East Anglia, a gathering at which I was speaking, if I remember, on something about the importance of lay ministry. Of this annual gathering at Selwyn College Ronnie remarked, "Writers who are Readers are doubly locked away, and so I find this jaunt doubly interesting." Though he went on to say, and I don't for one moment take this personally, "Lectures are inclined to make me day dream. While some take notes, I take the opportunity to take stock of the day."

As well as being a Lay Canon of this Cathedral, of which I know he was immensely proud, his ministry as a Reader was part of the public expression of his faith, and it was a ministry to which he was immensely devoted. And, as you know, when he was ever challenged about the possibility of being ordained, he would respond about how important was the ministry of the laity, on which he was undoubtedly right. It is not an exaggeration to say that he has sustained the life of the churches in his community for many years, well into his 90s, through his faithful leading of the weekly round of services, and his preaching.

I have found myself wanting to characterise his faith as particularly English. It First of all, it was domestic, in the sense that it was about the homely place, the things of home, what we notice round about, even if those things connected far more widely, such as to the events of world wars. But the starting point was what he observed in his immediate vicinity.

And secondly, I'd describe his faith as English because it was understated, undemonstrative yet profound, and reassuringly so at a time when some seem to want to press us into being demonstrative and, well, less profound.

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Maybe I am being slightly unfair saying undemonstrative, because of course his faith was demonstrated, and demonstrated very clearly in his ministry as a Reader, in his preaching, in his writings and not least in the weekly Word from Wormingford which I suspect was the only piece in the Church Times many of us consistently read, and for that he has rightly been described as the Church of England's poet. There his faith was demonstrated, not propositionally, but anecdotally, inferentially, tangentially, familiarly.

And through his writings, and through his acquaintance for those who knew him well, his faith was seen not to be a matter of the head, or even an affair of the heart, but a way of life, of being, of seeing.

John Clare's *The Nightingale's Nest*, which we have just heard from, is all about the way in which Clare observes the world about him without making himself more important than that world, acutely sensitive to the possibility of spoiling what he observes.

The poem goes on with a record of patient observation over time –Clare knows the nightingale is there somewhere, because he has heard her year in, year out: this personal experience is the best and only form of knowledge, of knowing things, for Clare.

Ronnie similarly observed life with a generous, careful, modest eye and didn't seek to change but to record, to share his joy, and then to leave in peace what he wrote about. Like Clare, Ronnie was thoroughly interested in a rural life and landscape which (as he understood it) was disappearing. Like Clare, he wanted to preserve, but understood the delicacy of not interfering, and like Clare he found beauty and glory in the mundane; the extraordinary in the ordinary. A way of seeing, of being, of faith.

In similar vein, Rowan Williams, who greatly regrets being unable to be with us today, wrote this, for me to share with you. "Thomas Hardy wrote a poem in his old age in which he imagines people after his death observing this or that little feature of the landscape and remembering that 'he was a man who used to notice such things.' All over Suffolk there will be those who hear a bird sing, watch a shrub blossoming, see the skies shifting or distant columns of rain drifting across the horizon, and will say 'Ronnie was a man who used to notice such things.' Far more widely, people will feel the quick spark of recognition at his accounts of the geography of a house or the turn of the seasons.

Rowan continues, "There are many ways of characterizing what is most distinctive about human beings, but one is simply that we are invited to notice - to bear witness, to reflect what is given from this unique angle of the world's reality that we inhabit. Ronnie took his stance as a watchman, quietly determined to share what he could see with a society both less wide awake and more feverishly hurried. That is what will make him loved by generations to come, as someone who worked consistently to become patient enough to look, and then to speak in that distinctive writing voice, level, quizzical, at home, but still deeply questioning.

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And Rowan concludes, “A man who used to notice such things - and so a man who manifested the grace of things, the truth that things are worth noticing. This world is looked at by its maker with infinite patience and infinite delight, and the true witness of the things of this world, the life of woodland or river or farm track, the habits of animals and the changes of weather, is someone who ultimately shows us a bit of what it is for us to be in the image of God.”

So, spotting Lenten Roses in the dark of night; or raw spring days and wind whistling through the thin hedge; a walk down a farm track; skylarks in song; lambing; selling the farm; returning from Mary’s funeral, and Flora’s wedding overlapping the village fete; or, the cutting of hay and the flower festival; children playing; a golden autumn day.

Moments interlaced with moments, woven together just as that other story teller who is woven through all Ronnie’s work, spoke of sowing wheat, and the struggle with weeds; a farmer building barns; a shepherd searching for his sheep; children in the market place; a wedding feast; harvest time; the red sky of the evening; a fig tree bearing no fruit; a fruitful vine; counting sparrows.

Moments interlaced with moments woven together pointing to the thread of purpose and preciousness within it all. Love is the word that other storyteller uses for this, which is what home is. “We will come to them and make our home with them.” In Ronnie we saw what that meant.

Ronnie declared he was entranced by the Easter story of the Road to Emmaus. “There cannot be many more Easters before the locals discover that I am much attached to the Emmaus story.” He goes on, “This is, after all, the evening of the day of the Lord’s Resurrection when he caught up with his frightened followers, and in whose house the first evensong was sung. But only after he had been recognised in the breaking of the bread.” We can see why Ronnie liked this so. A country walk, a couple of friends, a surprising encounter, a domestic scene, and the divine Lord, passed from death to life, there revealed through crust and crumbs.

And now that same divine Lord, passed from death to life, has caught up with Ronnie, and so they are, in mutual and glorious recognition that comes when you pass from death to life, Ronnie with his creator God, the grass below – above, the vaulted sky.