

Tribute to John Richardson

John used to like to tell people that he asked Daphne to read the Church Times for him and tell him if there was anything worth reading. She tells me that isn't quite true. And neither is it true – as he once told me – that he only read the obituaries.

But John had a gentle and kind sense of humour. He was a man of depth but didn't take himself too seriously. Although he was exceptionally well-read, he certainly didn't wear it as a badge of honour. Rather it shaped the man he was and the ways he interacted with those around him.

But I get ahead of myself.

John grew up in Chobham, Surrey. His fondness for the place never left him. Writing about his own painting of the place, John said: "The church played a prominent part in village life. Also in the picture are two pubs, the doctor's surgery, the butcher's shop and the bakery: all of which played a part in my upbringing and hold a special place in my life."

After grammar school, John trained as a draughtsman, and it was this that began his love of art and calligraphy. It was also during this time that he began to consider ordination, encouraged by his Vicar. This led him to Lichfield Theological College, where he trained for ministry over three years, being ordained deacon in 1965 and priest in 1966.

John served as curate at St. Mary's Chessington. I remember John telling me about his curacy, not least because it was so different from my own. In particular, his Vicar would ask him to go out visiting parishioners every afternoon, and report back. While times may have changed, I can imagine that John touched many lives through those gentle and sincere conversations. I suspect he had a story or two as well.

John's other responsibility as a curate was the Youth Group. It was a great joy to John that members of this group continued to meet up long after they stopped being "youths". In fact, I believe that one or two members might be here today. To those of us who knew John well, it is no surprise at all that those people he connected with continue to recognise that there was something important about the care he showed to them.

From Chessington, John went on to serve in parishes in Norfolk; St. John's Stoneleigh, just down the road, at a time when Colin Hooper, now a member of the Cuddington congregation, was a choirboy; then All Saints & St. John's, Kingston upon Thames; and finally St. Mary's Burpham in Sussex – which was supposed to be during his retirement.

John and Daphne returned to their home in Stoneleigh in 2009, but as those of us connected with this church know only too well, he never retired. For a number of years John was responsible for what some affectionately refer to as "dial-a-priest", which is mainly retired clergy who are willing to take services around the Diocese when a Vicar is on holiday or unwell. When he was not engaged elsewhere across the Diocese, John could often be found leading services locally, including at St. John's Old Malden during their latest interregnum. Prior to my own appointment here at St. Mary's, John had led the church throughout the 18 month interregnum, and was also active alongside Maggie prior to Joshva's recent installation.

And if active ministry wasn't enough, John never stopped studying. His MTh was accredited by Oxford, and his PhD by Chichester.

John loved his family, especially children Mark, Sarah and Joanna, step-daughters Suzanne and Paula, and all his grandchildren.

John was an avid reader. He and I would often console one another when struggling to find space for books. More recently, he read more widely about art. His passions were often combined, using his artistic talents to illustrate theological ideas.

If all of this provides the briefest summary of what John did, I am sure that everyone here knows that what really mattered was who John was. When I first arrived here in Cuddington, as I mentioned, John had been leading the church and congregation through the interregnum. Throughout my time here, he was a generous and gracious colleague, confidant and friend. He supported me in all that I tried; listened to my ideas and concerns; shared thoughts and ideas. John never tried to tell me what to do; he never asked if I would like feedback.

I think what I'm trying to say is that John lived out what he believed. That we are called to love one another. And what he showed to me was love. John was a man of great integrity because he actually practised what he preached. He lived out what he believed. I came to discover which aspects of ministry were the most meaningful for John. He loved the Eucharist, and presided with ease and grace. He allowed the liturgy to speak for itself, enabling congregations to connect with God in their own ways. During Lent, John would often lead Stations of the Cross. This is a service in which images and words guide us through the final days of Jesus's earthly life. It is a service of journeying and of connection, which John led beautifully.

Perhaps above all, John connected with people. But he did so in a quiet, gentle, unassuming way. He never forced himself or his ideas on people. John himself said this: "Our lives are so often focused on the great things. When we read the newspaper or listen to the news, we are usually confronted with "great things": such things over which we have little or no control yet which occupy so much of our thinking time. Whilst we must never forget that we are part of the "great things", our own personal lives may not be made up of great things, only small things." John was drawn to the words of Mother Teresa, saying: "Whilst we may have little control or influence over the great things, the small things over which we do have control can be done with great love."

John never told me how busy he was. He never came to be with an initiative that he thought would change the world. And yet he changed so many worlds. Because he did small things with great love.

Two confirmation services have been hosted here at St. Mary's over the last decade. One was just before I arrived and the other was not long after I had left. The candidates for both services were prepared, lovingly, by John. He never wrote headlines about church growth; neither did he boast of bringing people to faith. And yet he is the most faithful priest I have known. And by being the person he was, people encountered something of God.

John's life and ministry began and ended with one sure foundation: that God is love. Throughout his earthly life, he explored this truth in so many different ways. There is nothing trite about what John writes about love, and that is because he knew what it really meant. He knew that alongside love there can be hurt and pain; that we cannot control how others respond to our love; that our attempts at love are often imperfect.

But these truths did not deter him. He continued to be faithful to what he believed, however imperfectly. And in so doing he grew in his understanding of love and of God. His explorations always brought him back to the truth that God is love.

I will leave the final words of this tribute to John:

"To live with Christ is to live with love. As Christians, we never stop learning about the beauty and wonder of God. We come to know that this is the God who extended his love to us for our past mistakes and failures, and extends his grace to us now in our present anxieties and uncertainties. This is what we mean when we say "God is love.""

Rev Theresa Parker