

Funeral mass for John Hughes

In the name...

'This is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.' (John 6.40)

These are perhaps difficult and challenging words for us to hear on this of all days, for anyone who heard the news on that Monday morning after John's death, or sometime later that day or thereafter, will have found it hard to connect thoughts of 'raising up' with their feelings then. We are cast down, appalled and hollowed out by what has happened. John's death has torn a great hole in the social fabric of the lives of many of us. Like any sudden death, the pain and shock are no doubt all the greater the further into his circle of friends and family we are placed, and as it must seem to those of us who knew him as friend and colleague, and loved him as such, the loss to his family and close friends is unimaginable. And even more so, of course, to John's parents, Hywel and Janet. The scale of our gathering here is evidence, if it was ever needed, of how many people knew and loved John.

It's a tall order to sum up the life of anyone, and I knew only some sides of John and of his life. I didn't know him in his youth, of course, or in his family life, and I saw him only a little in the company of those who were his closest friends. I knew him as one of his research supervisors, and then as a colleague amongst the Deans and Chaplains of Cambridge, and so my view is inevitably incomplete. But what I saw was enough I think to give me a sense of what an extraordinary and rich person he really was. If I start there, as I first knew him, I can't help but note his fertility as a scholar and theologian. John was someone who had already made an original and creative contribution to modern Anglican theology; but I'm sure his best work was yet to come. When I worked with him, I found him to be someone of great intellectual range, whose maturity, breadth of reading and ability to cross disciplines was already impressive. If I was told that he had come into this world fully-formed intellectually, already quoting large chunks of Aquinas (particularly Aquinas), I could almost have believed it. Somehow, though never ceasing to learn, he also seemed complete. Supervising him was not exactly demanding: there was nothing to do really, except to allow the conversation to run wherever it would take us; I might suggest the odd book to read, or ask him to explain something I didn't understand; and he went on growing and developing in his work. John never tried to impress, yet impress is what he did, all the time. His hunger for learning was astonishing.

We do and many of us will remember him as a theologian, but for all of us that's beside the point today. It's the memory of his personality that will stand out for us as we look back on him in years to come. For he was, it has to be said, a man of extraordinary qualities, amongst which was a tremendous gift for making friends, a social charm and courtesy of manner and consideration that was utterly genuine and absolutely core to his nature. There wasn't anything forced or artificial about him. To encounter John was

to be drawn into a friendship with someone who combined deep humility, great warmth and openness with a sharp and independent mind. 'Quiet charisma' is the way someone put it to me. No one could doubt that John worked hard at almost everything to which he put his hand, and yet there was about him an ease and calm that invariably gave you confidence in what he was doing. But he had a terrific sense of humour, too, seemingly gentle at first, but opening into hilarity and mischief in those long evenings surrounded by friends and often eased by a good bottle of wine.

So although we do and will mourn him as a loss to the discipline of theology, and in particular to the theology of Anglicanism, great though that is, it is not why we are so cast down. We have lost a friend, a colleague, a cousin, a son. A chapel community has lost its centre. The ministry of the Church of England has lost one of the most brilliant and engaged of its younger clergy. Circles of friendship have been torn and scarred. And this, all because of what John was, in himself, as a man of truly social warmth, who delighted in the company of others, was quirky and different, and yet at the same time brilliant at connecting with others. He preached at King's just a few weeks ago, and the idea of sharing was central to his message – God shares his life with us, as we share our lives with each other.

You can find that idea running through so much of what John wrote and thought about. And it may offer a clue to the way we can start to think our way through this mess. John himself said at the beginning of his book on the theology of work, "work is made more delightful by company and cooperation". (p.x) For John, the idea of the social, and being social, was not an extra dimension of faith, as if 'social theology' was one branch amongst many, or as if we could rest complete in ourselves, and then, when we have time and leisure, make connections with others as some sort of addition – the social, rather, to him was absolutely core to what faith is. Christianity is a social faith, or it is nothing: John's work grasped that, and was dedicated to drawing out its full implications in the way we understand, as Christians, the world in which we are placed, with all our obligations, passions, ambitions, and failings synchronized accordingly. It was a perception that ran with the grain of his own very sociable nature, of course, but it was, all the same, a theological conviction too, carefully considered and defended with a formidable battery of evidence.

When, in St John's Gospel, Jesus says 'this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day', let us remember that this is said to the disciples, to a community of people who are already a body in waiting – a body that will be, in other words, the Church in the fullness of time. To ask the question, 'How can I be saved?', is to indicate a trajectory from the despair of isolation and separation – 'How can I be saved?' – into the social world of the one who will never allow us to be lost, into the life of God himself. God invites us to share his life, however imperfect the means by which we are able to do so here and now. And however imperfect – and goodness knows, there's a great body of people here who know all too well just how imperfect the Church is – the Church is still a concrete symbol and sign of that social life

of God. John Hughes served the Church faithfully to the best of his ability as a priest, and therefore as a teacher, a friend, a pastor, a hearer of secrets and a confessor, a giver of compassion and reassurance – all intrinsically social functions. And his own gaze was uncompromising, for all that he was quintessentially kind and warm, for it focused on the world to come. These are the very last words of his book – noting that when we work together and offer our joint work, our social work, to God as an offering pleasing in His sight, then, he says, we might receive it back from Him, “in its true fruits, both now, and in eternal life”. (p.232)

And what might that eternal life look like? The readings John chose for his own funeral, for whenever he thought that that was to come, pick up another favourite theme – the feast. Feasts are social; they are gatherings together to share together out of God’s abundance. Anyone who went to a feast with John could look forward to an evening of utter delight. No wonder he chose Isaiah 25 – ‘On Mount Zion the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees’. So while we are utterly cast down, at the same time John himself would have us raise our gaze upwards and forwards, so that we could glimpse something of what God is preparing for us, for God, the prophet says, will destroy on this mountain ‘the covering that is cast over all peoples’ and he will ‘swallow up death for ever’, and ‘wipe away tears from all faces’.

Isaiah, and then St Paul in 1 Corinthians, chart for us a course from the pain and limitations of this life to what is to come. No one could ever doubt John’s enjoyment of the good things of this life, but likewise no one could ever doubt his ability to understand and share the grief and pain of others. And in full awareness of that, still he could affirm through St Paul that our perishable nature ‘must put on the imperishable’, when death will be swallowed up in the victory of God. So he would urge us, with St Paul again, to be ‘steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord’.

When Jesus says, then, that it is the will of the Father that he lose nothing of all that he has been given, and that ‘every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life’, we know that what we are and shall be, and by extension all that we have known and treasured in the life of John Hughes, is not lost, but gathered to God, and will be raised up at the last day. For this is the will of the Father, and his will is sure and steadfast and can never be set aside. His is the victory, his is the wiping away of tears, his is the destroying of the veil covering humanity, his is the gathering of all things into the great feast of eternal life. He will take us to himself, and raise us up at the last day. I have absolutely no doubt that John believed that with every fibre of his being.

That gathering up of all things began long ago, as the Father gathers to himself those who have known the Son. When we affirm our belief in the Communion of Saints, our very affirmation joins us with the great society of those who have followed Christ and gone before us. So we are waiting for that last day. As is John, too.

And for now, despite all the pain and senselessness of his death, we must hold on to the promise of the God whose will never fails. In this eucharist, as we commemorate and mourn our beloved brother John, and pray for him, we also share, as he does surely now, in the life of God, through the body and blood of his son, given and poured out for us. In this sacrament, which John again faithfully ministered to the people he served, and in prayer and in praise, we are joined to the God who will raise us up at the last day. To him, then, be all might, majesty, dominion, and power, now and for evermore. Amen.