

## THE REVD CANON JOHN ALFRED THURMER

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*Dr David Grumett writes:*

CANON John Alfred Thurmer, formerly Lazenby Chaplain of the University of Exeter, and Canon Chancellor of Exeter Cathedral, died on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, 25 January, aged 89.

On leaving King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford, as head boy, he was called up for military service. This took him to Egypt and Palestine as a Royal Engineers railway clerk, and he rose to the rank of sergeant. Fortunate to be stationed for two years in Jerusalem, he experienced that city's rich Christian culture, including the Easter Vigil in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He was in the King David Hotel when it was bombed.

The following year, he returned to Britain physically unscathed, although he continued to be deeply affected by the death of his elder brother Jim from war wounds. After reading Modern History at Oriel College, Oxford, and two years at Lincoln Theological College, John was ordained, and served his curacy at St Michael and All Angels, Manor Park. His impressive intellectual capacities already evident, he was then appointed Chaplain and Lecturer at Salisbury Theological College, where he remained for nine years.

In 1964, he came to Exeter, where he would spend the rest of his life. In addition to his ministry as University Chaplain, he lectured in history and theology. As well as sung eucharists in the Mary Harris Chapel on Sundays and some saints' days, he led morning services in halls of residence, using a dining table. The communicants knelt around it on the carpet. Other initiatives included an Advent carol service and periodic retreats.

Combining good humour with spiritual depth, he once strengthened a student's resolve to abstain from alcohol for Lent without realising that this included her 21st birthday. In expiation, he gave her a bottle of Bollinger for Easter Sunday.

In 1973, shortly before retiring, Bishop Robert Mortimer appointed John to the Cathedral. His tendency to view the present from a historical perspective made John well-suited to this ministry, and he understood that effective and lasting change was usually incremental. He was well known for his pastoral sensitivity and warm hospitality, to servers and many generations of choral scholars, among others. He maintained a wide circle of friends.

Latterly, when the cathedral was going through one of its periodic financial crises, he stopped lecturing, and employed excellent skills as its Administrator. For the diocese, he directed the recruitment of self-supporting clergy and post-ordination training. His greatest contribution, however, was liturgical. He was instrumental in instituting a sung eucharist in place of choral evensong on saints' days, relocating the regular Sunday sung eucharist from the quire to a central nave altar, refurnishing several side chapels, and ensuring their regular use, and implementing the provisions of the Alternative Service Book. These developments were led with common sense and minimal fuss. Overall, John was a great figure in the cathedral's life in the later 20th century.

As a child, he had lived close to Dorothy L. Sayers in Witham, Essex, and much later became active in the Society bearing her name. He wrote two books on Sayers, *A Detection of the Trinity* and

*Reluctant Evangelist.* Sayers viewed human activity as analogous with divine activity, and human creativity as displaying something of the divine and leaving traces of God's work and message in the world. John was adept at detecting these traces, as in many contributions to the Cathedral Friends' annual report on aspects of the building's development and adornment, on which he was an authority.

He also produced the text for the Jarrold guide to Exeter, and a doctrinal study, *The Son in the Bible and the Church*, in which he laid out, among much else, the grounds for his implacable opposition to women's ordination.

On his retirement in 1991, the University of Exeter awarded him a Doctorate of Divinity. He became hon. assistant priest at Saint Michael and All Angels, Mount Dinham, presiding at the eucharist, officiating at vespers, preaching without notes, and helping chair lectures until well into his eighties. John was much loved there for his wisdom, learning, wit, welcome, and pastoral friendship.

*Professor Nicholas Orme adds:* John, a pupil at Oxford of Billy Pantin, was himself an outstanding scholar and teacher, with the rare gift of analysing a topic in a way that revealed its essential nature in simple terms: whether a period or person in history, or a problem in theology. I learnt more from him about how to understand and explain than from any of my university tutors.

His powers of perception made him an excellent judge of liturgical fitness, and a composer of sermons that were clear, arresting, and short; they rarely lasted more than five minutes.

He was so progressive in his views and belief in the evolutionary nature of the Church of England that some were surprised when, after his retirement, he espoused the causes of Forward in Faith and the Prayer Book Society, to whose journal he made many contributions. This did not prevent him from remaining a sympathetic listener to other points of view. Besides his work on Sayers, we are fortunate to possess a number of articles on Exeter Cathedral.

His friends, students and congregations will not forget John's memorable hospitality at the university, the cathedral and his house in Exeter. After generous helpings of excellent food and drink, the evening was likely (since he was a good mimic) to include his imitations of well-known clerical figures such as the astringent professor of theology and the gin-loving bishop. These were good-humoured sallies from someone who was unfailingly courteous and considerate to all.