

John Hughes Memorial Lecture – Wednesday 22 November

On a wet & windy evening, David Beadle, who had arranged this inaugural Memorial Lecture, welcomed John Hughes' parents, Janet & Hywel, friends from near and far, and many who had not had the joy of knowing John to St Michael's.

Dr Susannah Cornwall, University of Exeter theologian, reminded us of John's life; his time as Curate of the Parish from 2005-9, his work as Chaplain of Jesus College Cambridge, his abundant hospitality and adventurous cooking. In John's tragic death in June 2014, aged 35, the Church lost one of its brightest theologians, and we gave back to God a priest, pastor and friend of Christlike generosity & love.

John saw all life as sacramental and was always optimistic about the Church & its mission to work for a more generous society; reflected in his interest in the Radical Orthodoxy movement and Catholic Social teaching. For John, there was no pure nature or neutral secular realm, but all things could be seen in the light of faith as graced and caught up in the redeeming love of God.



Dr Edward Skidelsky of Exeter's Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology entitled his Lecture "How can Believers talk to Unbelievers about God?". When one has a love for someone or something, there's a desire to share that with people, but in a way that doesn't bore or threaten.

Like John, he has found debate and argument a rather sterile activity for sharing love and faith. Atheists have a misconception of what faith involves. Neither logical argument nor emotional blackmail are particularly effective methods of evangelism these days. Just as our Christian faith derives from the true story of Jesus, simply telling our stories of faith can be more effective.

Our diverse experiences of what we might call the spiritual or mystical moments in life are valid in building faith, even though unlike 'scientific' observations they are often one-off, non-repeatable events. Dr Skidelsky shared 3 personal steps in his journey of faith – which many will also identify with.

Beauty – in nature, sunset on water, or a mountaintop moment. Surprised by joy in C S Lewis's term. Overwhelming emotion as a validation of God's love in creation. But not a pantheistic worship of Nature, which also has a harsh and cruel face.

Regret – actually Edward used the word 'Sin'; the knowledge that we have hurt others, the feeling that we have not fulfilled, a need for someone truly good to forgive us.

Love – unconditional, unselfconscious, which he has recently found sharing the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. Though the Icons are copies, the singing a bit croaky, there is order without discipline, harmony without constraint. It's not perfect – no Church is – but an authentic community of loved, forgiven people.

Thus, by a rather different route, Dr Skidelsky reached a similar conclusion to Rev Austin in his Deanery Synod Bible Study on Discipleship (Nov 'New Leaves'), that the gentle practice of our faith is more attractive to others than its doctrines. As Philip said to Nathaniel, and as the woman at the well said to her Samaritan neighbours. "Come and See."

Thanks to all who made this evening a fitting and moving remembrance of John Hughes, through hospitality, friendship and shared stories.



Many of John's writings have been gathered in Matthew Bullimore's book 'Graced Life', and some sermons included in 'Preaching Radical & Orthodox' ed. Alison Milbank et al. (SCM Press).
Richard Barnes – 25 November 2017.

