



St James's Church Piccadilly London

ADDRESS AT CHRISTOPHER SNELL'S FUNERAL 30 JUNE 2008

The Revd Hugh Valentine

The email arrived on 20 November last year: brief, upbeat, positive and with elements of humour. "My wonderful, highly challenging show (Chris wrote) is just over and I am setting my thoughts to the next chapter, which is already clear in part, albeit through no planning on my part". That next chapter on which he was focusing was, as he went on to say, treatment for tumours that had been discovered as the cause of the abdominal pain that had been affecting him.

Some of you will have heard the news at about the same time. Others will have received an email on 7 December from Ashanti's address, reporting their safe arrival in London and the setting up of Chris' *Caring Bridge* web page as a means of keeping his diverse network of friends informed. The password for the site was to be CaptainTock – the name of the character he had just played in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* and staged – to enthusiastic reviews – at The Celebration Theatre in West Hollywood.

And now, just seven short months later, Christopher is dead. No words from me or anyone else, no comforting liturgy can detract from these three sharp words. And his 'goneness', his absence, dances around demanding our unhappy attention, telling us something we don't want to know, as does every death within our personal circle, and sometimes beyond it.

It tells us unwelcome things about loss, about our fragility, about our susceptibility to the rogue cell, about the shortness of human life and its unique and fragile and wondrous expression in each single life. Grief is like hearing the ring of the telephone intrude into our sleep, where we try not to hear it, try not to be dragged into its reality. But it eventually wakes us, and the conversation with the new reality has to begin.

Many were shocked by the news of Christopher's death, having not been aware of what was happening to him. Others found it more sudden than they had expected, even though they knew of its inevitability. Each of us will be experiencing our own reaction to his being taken from us. It will be nuanced, reflecting the different ways in which each of us knew him. I hope that in this time together today (formal though it is) we are each able in some way to attend to the feelings in our hearts, and to hold in our prayers one another in that same process. And we are particularly mindful of Margaret: having attended the funeral of her daughter Julia some years ago now attends that of her son Christopher; and we are mindful, too, of Adrian and Tim and their partners and children and the other members of a family Chris loved and was loved by.

We are a diverse collection gathered here today in memory of this thoughtful, disciplined and in some ways driven man. I had found myself wanting to say that his life and his friendships had been compartmentalised but I am not sure that is quite the right description. It may be closer to say that he had quite different circles, and not all overlapped with others. He had a great capacity for making and retaining friends: many of us experienced him as an accepting, interested and non-judgmental friend. Some will remember, in particular, his humour and the laughter shared with him; others knew him more as serious and thoughtful. Some saw composure and self-assurance, others his longing to become a successful, recognised, actor

and his anxiety (sometimes more than anxiety) at not achieving the status or security he observed in others of his generation.

Chris was born into a church household – a son of the Vicarage - and his faith was nurtured in the evangelical tradition of the Church of England. He valued that heritage and retained many of the friends he made in those days, some of whom are here today. He later explored other Christian settings as part of his wanting to be true to both the Gospel of Jesus Christ as he understood it and his identity as a gay man, about which he was becoming more confident – confident in the sense of knowing that it was a fundamental and ‘given’ part of who he was as a person, before God. It is a process of exploration many gay Christians take, and it is often not easy. I am glad to say that here at St James’s - and at St Thomas the Apostle Hollywood which became his LA Christian community - Chris found a home, a place in which his experiences were honoured and often shared, and somewhere he could share his diverse gifts. His earlier coming out was not easily accepted by everyone, but those who loved him sought to accommodate this new fact about him, and many have spoken of growing in their understanding as a result of it, and as a result of his honesty and his courage. His family welcomed Howie, who is here today, who shared Chris’ life for six years or so until Chris’ decision to settle in the States made it difficult for them to continue as a couple.

Since his return to the UK some of the different circles I mentioned have begun to overlap. This arose partly from circumstance and partly from the work which, I am certain, Chris was undertaking in these last months and doing so in a characteristically disciplined way. This was ‘interior’ work, and I want to say more about it in a moment. This recent linking of people across his different circles was helped by the hospitality and care and the love he received from those with whom he stayed. His Lonsdale Road flat was not available to him. He stayed with a number of friends including Marty; Lizzie and Oliver in their City rectory; and (most significantly) with Tim and Avril in Watford where he found such a rich mix of family care, gentle surroundings and security. For all these hospitalities he was unfailingly appreciative. In these final seven months I heard no criticism or complaint about anyone or any service he received - with the exception of one grumpy fellow patient with whom he briefly shared a room at the Watford Hospice.

I mentioned ‘interior work’. I believe it is correct to say that Chris did not speak directly about the possibility and the growing inevitability of his early death from this disease. Apart from a laconic and almost throw-away line in January that if he died in the UK I was to conduct his funeral, if in the USA it was to be Ian Davies of St Thomas Hollywood, he did not speak to me explicitly about dying. That appears to have been the experience of most of his friends and family. The term ‘denial’ is casually used these days. I do not, myself, think that Chris was – to use the jargon – ‘in denial’ about what faced him. There was evidence of his undertaking much ‘interior’ work. It took the form of the questions he raised, the themes he explored, the things he asked and the relationships he took to deeper levels. Above all, it took the form of an astonishingly positive mindset, one that could be considered as avoidance, but I think only mistakenly. He chose to think positively. I came to think that this drew on his professional skill and discipline as an actor and on his understanding of the mystery of God – neither of which, for him, allowed recourse to negative thinking.

This ‘positive’ thinking was not positive for the sake of it but because such an outlook possessed (for him) an *instrumentality*: that is, that such an approach to work and life (indeed,

death) *became the condition* in which the best might be given wings – the best that was possible within whatever constraints existed. His plan to spend a month in the States in the autumn (he spoke of this just days before he died) may have seemed unrealistic to some, as undoubtedly it was; to him it was part of living with a sustaining vision.

I know this view is not shared by everyone. We can bear witness only to what we see. What is not disputed is the courage Chris possessed and demonstrated in so many ways over the years.

He once spoke of some of the responses he had received when he came out. One was to be told by someone of importance to him that it was obvious he no longer knew Christ. I have always been impressed by Christopher's faith: serious, thoughtful, inward, somewhat understated, and strong. The principal Christian sacrament of the Eucharist became important to him. When I heard him praying (-this was in the context of our celebrating the Eucharist together over the last six months in various settings including, improbably but memorably, the WRVS store cupboard of Hammersmith Hospital, for the chapel was busy-) when I heard him pray I was struck by the familiarity and ease and confidence with which he spoke to God. I suspect this was one of the many graces and gifts that had been nurtured in him by his evangelical experiences. He had taken those experiences and integrated them with other discoveries and experiences, some of which had been testing and harsh, others of which had fed his soul (I am thinking here particularly but not exclusively of the love he received from and shared with Howie).

The Gospel which we heard read by Ben was the familiar parable about a sower sowing seed, with some falling on rocky ground, some threatened by the weeds, some falling on good soil. It is a simple parable in which the seed that falls in the good soil is compared to those [as Luke says] who "when they hear the word [of God] hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance". It is a good parable. Yet whenever I hear it I think of the rocky places, the infertile places and the weed-ridden stretches of our own individual journeys, and of how (with God's grace and our own determination and the love of others) we may yet bring forth a good and great harvest. Christopher experienced (as many of us do) some inhospitable and harsh stretches. He brought out of them so many good and rich things.

So Christopher's years here are finished, but his life goes on in a different and - we dare to believe - fuller reality. In our grief we praise you God for our beloved brother: for his life, for all he gave to us and for all we shared with him. And Chris, we thank you too, for being you and for journeying alongside us.

Glory to God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.