



The Word – and Bill Kirkpatrick

If you are a regular you may have done a double-take when you heard the gospel just now (the opening – or prologue – of John's Gospel). It is considered rather special, usually brought out and dusted down at the Christmas Eve midnight celebration of the Eucharist where the usual honour given to the gospel is somehow accentuated by the special day and the late hour, and when we hear it from a mixture of pre-Christmas fatigue and relief that at last we've reached the Big Day.

Quite why it then pops up again so soon I have no idea. But here it is, in the lectionary, and we might as well view it as a treat. I have been wondering how best to respond to it, in this small two-Sunday window of what the Church calls 'Ordinary Time' and before we reach Lent (you and I know that in this amazing adventure called life, there *is* no 'ordinary' time).

I wondered if, spared the razzle-dazzle of the liturgical happenings late on Christmas Eve, this very familiar and pretty magnificent bit of the gospel might have unfamiliar things to say. By way of that, I want to tell you something about a friend, whose funeral I attended last week. There is a reason for doing so, which might become plain.

Bill Kirkpatrick died at the beginning of this year and after almost a decade of severe and incapacitating mental illness, what they believed was a combination of psychosis and dementia. He had just turned 90. He had been born in Canada, the result of a liaison between his widowed father and the housekeeper. Within a month he was deposited at a private orphanage in Vancouver, housing 50 other children. According to his account, the Great

Depression caused the home to close. He and one other child remained with the owners, and they took their name, but were never formally fostered or adopted by them. Bill was dyslexic, at a time when the condition was unrecognised, and because of this he was deemed at various stages to be lazy or stupid.

In his early twenties he came to London. His first job was selling saucepans in Selfridges. He followed that by working as cabin crew for BOAC. Once, on a stop-over in Calcutta, he was shocked by the raw poverty he encountered, and a seed was sown. He then trained in nursing, intending to return to Calcutta, but remained in London. Later, he encountered a man who was both a psychiatrist and a priest and – this is jumping ahead quite a bit – eventually offered himself for ordination.

There were difficulties. He was first refused ordination as a deacon and later, as a priest. But Trevor Huddleston, when bishop of Stepney, took the decision to ordain him (Trevor Huddleston, some of you may know, lived for several years in the attic rooms of the rectory here towards the end of his life).

Bill was intent on following the model of the French worker-priests. And, largely, that is what he did. Except that whereas they immersed themselves in what is called 'secular' work in factories and organisations, he found himself drawn to what he called 'loitering with intent'. He was by nature a contemplative, and the dislocations in his early life had sensitised him to the sufferings of others. He found himself in Earl's Court just before AIDS reached Britain in the 1980s. Unaware of that fast-approaching catastrophe, he sensed a need to locate

himself there, and to simply be available to those who needed him. He persuaded a charitable trust to provide a flat. And he hung around. Adjacent to his basement flat was the former coal cellar, which he converted to a chapel. [Never one to carefully manage supplies of communion wafers and wine, those who attended the coal chapel Eucharist sometimes found themselves offered consecrated cheese crackers and whiskey].

It is not possible to do justice to his work in a few words. He estimates that he supported over 1300 men with AIDS (then untreatable) and was present with over 350 of those as they died, then taking their funerals and supporting their loved ones. It is quite possible that most here today are unaware of, or have forgotten, how toxic was the mix of fear and contempt towards AIDS and in particular towards gay men in those years.

At his funeral I was able to pay him tribute and amongst other things said: *"Bill had experienced trauma in his early years... Insecurities in childhood's crucially developmental years exact a high price. And growing up gay in a straight world, likewise. Bill's early experiences were ones which left him with the messages that he did not fully belong, was not fully wanted, was not really approved of. What he managed to achieve in the light of those messages has been astonishing. His life provides an infinitely more compelling reading of Christ's Gospel than any barrow-load of academic theology or traditional preaching or church pronouncements. Bill brought himself, without adornment, to the energy the Church calls grace and the results have been significant and beautiful. In the most straightforward of ways he contemplated what the gospels say about the elusive Nazarene [Jesus] and he sought to live that out in the costly way of giving himself to others. 'Listening' and 'being there' go a good way towards summing up Bill's life and work, but only if heard beyond the language of cliché. The transformation of our psychic wounds into the unself-conscious business of loving and healing others is indeed the work*

of grace. And in this, Bill's life and witness have been, remain, of tremendous significance."

Before his illness, Bill would sometimes show up here on a Sunday morning when I was taking the 9.15 Eucharist in the side chapel, and we'd then head off to an Italian café just along Piccadilly for breakfast, now swept away by the so-called 'improvements' in this part of the West End.

Why do I want to introduce you to Bill? Because he was an icon – as many of you are or will become: a representation of things good and Godly, not in any self-conscious or showy way, not at all. And because he had been starved in those crucial early years of love and security and yet went on to become hugely loving in the most unsentimental and costly of ways. And because his work as a priest was in the shadows, self-effacing and concentrated on those beyond the reach of the church. These things form your vocation, also. This account of him is not to make him seem different and other worldly – just the opposite. What he grew into was a kind of *ordinary holiness*. He was also sometimes cheeky, playful and great fun.

I see similar qualities and impact amongst many of you here, and amongst those who were here and have moved on, and amongst people I know who are themselves well beyond the reach of the church. In one sense, whether this kind of ordinary, lived holiness is church rooted or not is entirely beside the point. John's prologue does not say *In the beginning was the Church*.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

- And the Word encountered love withheld, and was ridiculed.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

- And the Word wept as it beheld suffering and those who are discarded and discounted

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

- And the Word found its home in unexpected places, often in the hearts of women and men who had discovered the limits to worldly wisdom and success, yet who did not fully know how precious in God's sight they were

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

- Among us, part of us. In our pockets of shame, in our fears, in all our vulnerabilities, in our night terrors, in our loneliness.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

- Inviting us home, fostering and adopting us, creating the conditions

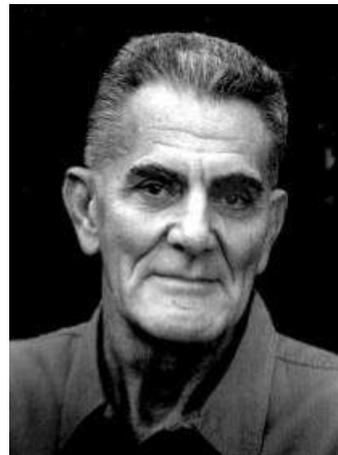
of our healing, allowing us to respond to the same presence in others.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

- And making itself at home in our flesh and in our lives, enables us to venture beyond ourselves, that we might find freedom and joy, and be of good service to one another.

Amen.

Hugh Valentine



Fr Bill Kirkpatrick
1927-2018