

Bob Thorn

Address by Ven Paul Taylor, Archdeacon of Sherborne, at the Requiem Eucharist on Easter Saturday, 19th April 2014

I begin with some words from Bob himself, writing in his wonderful book *My Dear Douglas*, describing the pilgrimage he and Jean took from Bristol to Holy Island during his last sabbatical in 2003. 'When I had first thought of pilgrimage I had only vaguely pondered a destination. One might suppose that this was attaching the front of a horse to the back of a cart, which I am inclined to do, but then again one of the clichés of pilgrimage is that the going is at least as important as the destination. It was Jean who suggested that I should go to Lindisfarne. This was in the early days of our walking out together, when she could not know that she might one day find that she had volunteered herself down the road and off into the far distance. In one of our less relaxed moments on pilgrimage, at the end of a long day's walking in the cold and wet, she once asked what had possessed me to think of Holy Island as a destination....When I reminded her that it was she who had first made the suggestion, it was no reminder to her at all, but completely new information to her memory. 'Oh! So it's my fault now is it?' she said, in imitation of what I always suppose to be God's reply to the psalmist. But I was able to insist forcibly and in good conscience that she had waxed very long and lyrical about the beauties of Lindisfarne, the holiness of the Saints and the spiritual depths of our eyes as we gazed at one another over pints of beer in the Jolly Sailor at Saltford....So Lindisfarne it was to be, and in honour of Saints Aidan, Cuthbert and all...It was to link our walking with the pilgrimages of the Celtic Saints.'

When Bob and I first met ten years ago, I had just finished walking the Pennine Way and was therefore captivated by the journey that Bob and Jean had also just taken. Bob kindly gave me a copy of his book and in reading it, which I did in my first few weeks as Archdeacon, I quickly realised that Pilgrimage for Bob wasn't an add-on, something to do on sabbaticals every ten years or so, but at the heart of his Christian life. Bob's remarkable journey to Cornwall over the past few weeks, was for him an expression of what he believed to be at the heart of things, stepping out of the comforts and securities of life, the TV, the artificial light and warmth of home, the protection of the pressing busyness of life, in order to be able to see God and our place in his world more clearly. Bob knew that Pilgrimages teach us something important about faith - reminding us that faith isn't about retreating into the comfort and protection of what we know, but a stepping out with trust, courage, confidence and hope into what we don't yet know. Pilgrimages remind us that Christianity is not a backwards looking faith but a forwards looking faith. Bob knew above all that Jesus calls us to step out into the future with the assurance that on our journey we will always have the accompaniment of the 'One who goes there before us'.

As we know Bob's most recent sabbatical pilgrimage was this incredible journey in a small 10ft rowing boat to Cornwall. For a month he lived the simplest of lives, sleeping under the boat on Pendower beach, foraging and fishing for food, reading his bible and praying, both at the simple shrine he'd constructed on the beach and in nearby Portscatho church. This was both a journey into the unknown, but also, in a very real sense a going home. Although Bob had been born in Bucks, where his father was a serving RAF officer in Bomber Command, he grew up in Portscatho where the family went to live after his father left the RAF to become an accountant. Bob soon developed a passion for the sea and loved nothing more than going out fishing with his dad in the family boat. Primary School in Portscatho was a child's dream, with the beach serving as the playground. This gave opportunity for all sorts of creative games, not least digging holes, filling them with jelly fish, putting a thin layer of sand over the top, and then waiting for an unsuspecting tourist to fall in. Clearly the teaching staff had their own particular idiosyncrasies, as one used to have his monkey present with him in the classroom. Prep school at St. Michael's Tavistock Court in Barnstable, was then followed by secondary years at Kelly College in Tavistock. By the age of 17 Bob knew he was called to be a priest, and therefore 3 years at King's, followed by a period of time window cleaning, on the instruction of the Bishop in order that he might know something about the, quote, 'real world', led to Chichester theological college, and then ordination in Truro Diocese aged only 23, which made him the youngest deacon in the Church of England. He was curate in Bodmin, Team Vicar in North Hill, Launceston, and then Vicar of Feock and Diocesan Ecumenical Officer. Tragically Bob's first wife Liz died just as the family were about to move to Lincolnshire, where Bob became Broadcasting Officer and teacher in the theological college and diocese. He had done a great deal of religious broadcasting for Radio Cornwall and this seemed like an ideal post. However, it had been badly set up and Bob found himself in a very different and much less happy ministry than he had hoped for. These were difficult times for Bob and his young family and therefore after three years they moved to Whitchurch on the edge of Bristol, where Bob took on a parish, which itself had many challenges. During this time Bob met, fell in love with, and eventually married the neighbouring Vicar, Jean. Jean said to me the other day, right from the outset Bob's family have been utterly amazing to her. Having been with them at various points over the last week, I can see how wonderfully integrated and natural with one another the family is. I know that Jean is so deeply grateful for family – now grown to include partners and grandchildren. What stands out between everyone is deep friendship and overwhelming empathy. This was universally clear in the way that the whole family said without hesitation that what was required in Bob's funeral was what devotees of the film Zoolander will immediately recognise – that is a Eugoogly. I don't know whether Ben Stiller would consider me an adequate Eugooglizer or not, but what was

patently obvious to me is your shared humour reflecting in itself a shared empathy and embedded loving commitment, one to another. This was abundantly evident in the wonderful way that you nursed and supported Bob back to health after his devastating cerebral haemorrhage 5 years ago.

The other day Jean gave me the two CDs Bob had made as a present; *The Shortest River in Dorset* and *My 2nd Best Guitar*. As I've been driving around over the last few days I've been playing them. I obviously knew that Bob played the guitar and sung but I have to say I had no idea how good he was. As I listened I was immediately caught up in the music but more than that, the songs, all composed by him, gave me an even deeper insight into what mattered to him and his take on things. I think it's not overstating it to say that there is a cutting edge profundity to them, as well as a considerable beauty, which has touched me greatly. It was as a 14 year old in Truro Folk Club, and with the influence of people like Ella, that Folk music for Bob became one of the main ways of expressing his deepest feelings and beliefs. Jean has said that 'his lyrics and music expressed the beauty of his inner soul'.

The number of people here today, and the large number that gathered for prayers last Wednesday, is in itself tribute to him and all he has given to so many. As a colleague, which he has been for me over ten years, I most appreciated his deep honesty and profound integrity. This meant that Bob would speak the truth in a way that was refreshing, as it invariably came from deeply held principles, and cut through the avoidance that we are all too prone to. One of his Rural Dean colleagues said to me on Thursday in the Cathedral that it was people like Bob that kept him in the Church of England as although one wouldn't always agree with him, he was prepared to challenge honestly and openly. Another said you could have a ding dong debate with him knowing that you would remain friends and loyal colleagues. As a great word-smith he would send me passionate, and dare I say inordinately long emails, about issues that he felt strongly about. As parish priest and Rural Dean, as a member of a number of key diocesan committees, he would always speak forcefully from the perspective of the parish priest and ensure that committees remembered what it was like on the ground in a parish. With courage and conviction Bob ensured that the voice of the local, and especially the rural local, was heard. Bob was of course no 'shrinking violet', saying it as it is, without worrying too much what people thought, maintaining great loyalty to the diocese while at the same time being someone not frightened to challenge if he disagreed with something. However, above all what I saw in Bob was humility. He was never in the slightest interested in his own advancement but only ever in what was right, and fair and good. He was always wonderfully hospitable, loving to share a meal with others. Often cooking himself with great skill, more rustic of course than fine dining, while at the same time answering the phone and dealing with

parish and other business. An inveterate multi-tasker he was generous to a fault. His first concern was for his own relationship with God and for the wellbeing of his parishes and communities. Bob cared: about his faith and about his people. Bob prayed, which was reflected in the profundity of his sermons and the way that the words of the liturgy were not just said, but a prayer that came from within him. Jean has said that for Bob the Christian life can be summarized very simply as 'Holy people; Holy things; and Holy places'.

It's pertinent that we are holding Bob's funeral mass today, of all days – between Good Friday and Easter. Easter and Good Friday inextricably belong together. For Easter doesn't mean that suffering and death is suddenly banished, but that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ a new song and strength for life has entered. The moments when death raises its head therefore become those very occasions for hope. Our failures become the occasion for repentance and renewal into life, and physical death is now accompanied by the sure work of God's new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our life is therefore filled with an array of possibilities, not simply waiting us somewhere out in the future, but at work in all our frail and hesitant struggles here and now. And so St. Paul can declare to the Colossians: you were dead; but you have been raised to life with Christ. And so he can pray, in his letter to the Ephesians, that they might know with their whole being '...the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe...which he put to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead...' Bob knew this well, its truth sat at the heart of his own Christian life and journey, and it was in this context that we commended him to his Lord and redeemer.

The resurrection of Jesus is thus the measure of God's power over death, a power at work in us every day we live.

I would like to end, as I began, with some of Bob's own words from Dear Douglas:

'After breakfast at the Vicarage, we took the dogs to Church....Brother Damian dug out a candle rack, and we put it before St. Peter's altar. We sang a hymn and read the last chapter of Matthew's gospel. Jean brought out the red book signed by all the people with whom we had stayed. We went through the memory of each day...and how it was to rest with those who had given us shelter. At the end of each remembrance we lit a candle. It took us an hour and half to light them all. Then we waited and watched the lights until they began, one by one from the beginning of our pilgrimage, to go out...The last candle went out. The pilgrimage was at an end.'

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
Fellow trav'lers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load

I will hold the Christlight for you
In the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear

I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven,
We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.