

Funeral Sermon for Andrew Walters, March 5th 2013

As we all gather here today to say goodbye to Andrew; for Romie and Mike and for all us here as Andrew's family and friends this funeral liturgy is an opportunity to truly celebrate and give thanks for a life that has so impacted on ours and to comfort each other in our grief. Within this funeral liturgy we gather to engage with the past, present and future. In fact all the major moments in our earthly lives when families and friends gather; our birth, our move into adulthood, our marriage, our death are all recognised through particular Christian services – Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and Funeral and each in their own unique way engages with the past, the present and the future.

And so we look to the past, to the personal and corporate memories of Andrew that bind us all together today. If you forgive the metaphor, collectively we are like those photo collages that are often found in downstairs bathrooms – random photos of major events, trips out, holidays, routine life all recorded together in one place. But today this collage has a specific theme; every single photo has Andrew at its centre.

It seems impossible to believe that there was a time when the world did not know Andrew, but it is true – in fact Andrew was born on the 20th July 1942 in the school house at Lichfield, Andrew's parents having arrived in Lichfield, with Romie, the year before in October 1941.

His gregarious personality was apparent from an early age when his mother would push him into the town and Andrew would say "Hello man" to any workmen he saw, usually with their response "Oh Hello Andrew". No one knew quite how the workmen knew his name, but knew it they did!

He was also known to visit the Dean with the rather precocious comment "Hello Dean, I've come to see you." The Dean would fend off Andrew's advance with "Thank you Andrew. I'm a bit busy at the moment, so could you come back another time?" But not deterred in any way, Andrew would do just that! The Dean discovered that even at an early age Andrew had a healthy disregard for the trappings that came with high office. Though only a toddler, respect still had to be earned! Many a Bishop, Dean and Archdeacon have since learnt that lesson from Andrew at their cost!

After attending Miss Austin's kindergarten, Andrew became a pupil at Lichfield Cathedral Choir School, St Chad's - as it then was, with his father as his head master. He became head chorister and won the Victor Ludorum in 1955 before moving to Ellesmere College in Shropshire. On leaving Ellesmere he worked for Walsh Graham's Construction in the Midlands before deciding to venture in to teaching.

He became a master at Stubbington House in Ascot under Mr Renton and Mr Moore, where he made many lifelong friends amongst staff and boys and he also took time out to gain the then equivalent of the Certificate of Education, at St Luke's College, now part of Exeter University.

It was at Stubbington that Andrew met Sally who became his wife and soul-mate in August 1975. He also further developed his love of cricket – and practical jokes, more of which later. He progressed up the ranks to become a senior member of staff and was subsequently appointed as Warden of St Michael's College, Tenbury in 1977

It was during his time at Tenbury that Andrew explored his priestly vocation and he was subsequently ordained Deacon in Hereford Cathedral on Sunday 28 June 1981 and ordained priest in the following summer on Sunday 27 June 1982.

Andrew and Sally were devastated when St Michael's was forced to close in 1985 and Andrew was grateful to his friend Christopher Helyer, then Headmaster of Exeter Cathedral School for providing him with a chaplaincy post. This gave Andrew time to take stock and in 1987 he was appointed Headmaster of Homefield Preparatory School in Sutton. I'm sure his stay at Homefield would have been longer, but the job to end all jobs came up and in 1991 Andrew returned to where it all began, the Close at Lichfield Cathedral, this time not as a pupil, but like his father before him, Headmaster of the Cathedral School.

As so often though in Andrew's life, tragedy was just around the corner. His beloved Sally was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1995 and after an extraordinarily brave fight, it got the better of her and she died in 1997. Andrew never recovered fully from the loss of Sally.

During his later years at Lichfield Andrew adopted Alex, who had been one of the boys who participated in a Russian exchange experiencing life in an English prep school. As part of the exchange program Andrew went to Russia himself to visit Alex's home town.

Following a heart attack and a by-pass operation, he finally retired from Lichfield in 2000 and went to live at The Drey where he had already completed the first instalment of alterations. His days were full, visiting his mother who lived across the valley, taking numerous weddings and christenings for former pupils, taking local services, gardening and, of course, enjoying the epic sailing holidays, courtesy of Nigel Bayley. He also became an excellent chef and enjoyed putting on dinner parties which would put most of us to shame.

He subsequently had his mother staying with him at The Drey as she became less able to care for herself. This was both a rewarding and a taxing time for both as they each were strong characters and his mother died in 2004

Andrew then embarked on further alterations to The Drey in 2007 with a final addition of a conservatory, just completed before his birthday last July so that it was in use for his 70th birthday celebrations which he enjoyed so much.

His further numerous activities included being a member of the Ouseley Trust, a Governor at Trent College and member of the local community council of which he was variously treasurer and chairman. He was an enthusiastic member of the MCC and would attend test matches at Lords whenever he could.

Andrew's adult life was one that was blighted by illness and yet in so many ways it also defined him for so many people, especially the manner in which he lived through and overcame suffering. It was his lack of self pity, of sentimentality that was so inspiring. Never once did I hear him say 'Why me?' Rather each illness, each visit or stay in hospital, each unpleasant and invasive procedure was something to be faced, head on, always with his usual self defacing humour.

It was at Stubbington that he first became unwell. Eventually, Andrew was diagnosed with a seminoma which was successfully treated with radiotherapy until he had secondaries in his chest five years later whilst at Tenbury. This required major surgery, followed by chemotherapy. Ironically, it was the initial rather unrefined radiotherapy of the 1970s that left residual damage to his heart and lungs and it was this damage that led in later years to an increasing number of chest infections which he bore stoically. A key support throughout this time was Jackie Williams whose wonderful care for Andrew is so appreciated by Andrew's family and friends.

Andrew and Sally loved their dogs. Over many years of marriage a stream of singularly devoted Springer spaniels graced their home, each uniquely trained by Andrew and they were also a great source of companionship in the many years that followed Sally's death. I remember one being able to fetch by name a series of different spitting image dog toys of the politicians of the day. Andrew was never prouder than seeing the spitting image head of Neil Kinnock being devoured on cue!

As a Headmaster, his ability to engage with children was unsurpassed in my view. His care, compassion and concern were never ever in doubt. With Andrew we had a friend, a mentor, a confidant and most of all an inspiration. And that care did not end when we left school, as so many old boys of all the schools where Andrew taught would testify.

But we cannot look back on Andrew's life without focusing on his extraordinary and unique sense of fun. Andrew metaphorically never stopped wearing short trousers –

his impish and childlike sense of humour was infectious and incredibly attractive. To be teased by Andrew was the ultimate compliment because it came from such an affectionate place. There are too many examples of Andrew's impish sense of humour for one sermon, so please forgive me for mentioning a personal one.

When I first went to St Michael's Tenbury I had just conquered a lisp but was not good at pronouncing my 'Rs'. Though never mentioned while I was at school, when I visited Andrew in my early twenties we shared a good giggle about it, with Andrew constantly mispronouncing every word he could inconspicuously – he sounded like Elma Fud and had me in stitches. From then on any card or letter, any phone call or introduction he would mispronounce his Rs. It is how I would know immediately who was on the phone. Even my address on the infamous Christmas card would suffer the Elma Fud treatment – how they ever got to me is testament to our postal system.

I was speaking to a former director of music who worked under Andrew who shared a typical story of Andrew's unique and totally unPC sense of humour. They were together, travelling by coach, on a choir tour to Germany. Andrew had been absolutely clear about the behaviour he expected from boys under his charge – no swearing, no jumping about, no shouting and no raucous singing – and yet as they crossed over the border into Germany he suddenly jumped out of his seat, put on a tape and led the choir in a very raucous performance of Elma Bernstein's classic film theme, 'The Great Escape'.

Another former colleague mentioned being very confused when mowing the cricket strip in preparation for a school match. He would mow away from the school buildings towards the cricket pavilion end and when he turned the mower around, there at the opposite wicket resting nonchalantly against the middle stump, having arrived as if by magic, was a bottle of cold beer. This kept happening as the season progressed and it was only by chance finding Andrew, hiding behind a building giggling to himself, that he finally discovered who the culprit was.

And the practical jokes did not stop at the door of school – rival Heads of Prep Schools were known to have had palpitations when they received notification of HMI inspections, all plausibly written on the correct named paper, only to discover some clue to the identity of the true sender within the final paragraph or sentence, which usually included some ridiculous request!

So though it is right that our thoughts and memories rest in the past; we also meet in the present, here today, giving due deference to the reality that we gather as family and friends marking Andrew's return to the loving embrace of God. This is the true purpose of this service, to come together and celebrate Andrew's life, to share our memories, to mourn our loss, to say our final goodbyes and to thank God for all that Andrew has meant and continues to mean to us.

But finally we also meet looking to the future, to the Christian hope that death is not the end, but a new beginning with our belief that Andrew is now enfolded in the loving arms of the God who loves him and each one of us; to the Christian hope revealed in the knowledge that though Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross, he then rose again on the third day; the Christian hope that we believe that we will all be reunited at the final resurrection of the dead.

Andrew fully understood that the Christian faith does not hide from suffering or death; rather it meets it face to face. Christianity does not deny its existence, but through it reveals a God who understands about pain, suffering and death. Not a cerebral, intellectual understanding lacking in empathy. Quite the opposite; God's understanding is complete because he also experienced pain, suffering and death in human form on the cross.

This is why Easter is central to our faith and why Christ's passion, death and resurrection are celebrated and remembered each time we share in the Eucharist, that through the resurrection Jesus not only defeated death once for all on the cross, but that he is alive and with us forever, in our earthly lives and beyond our death.

In the loneliness of grief and mourning that message of hope can feel a long way away. Yet it is there and remains for us. God is always reaching out to us in love. It applies to those who have gone before us, it applies to Andrew, it applies to us now and it applies to everyone in the future. Andrew was a living testament to the extraordinary and immeasurable love of the risen Christ.

So may the God who loves us all beyond measure and who is along side us in our grief, bless us all this day and surround us always with his unending and limitless love.

Amen.