

Martin Beaumont

The eulogy given on September 26th 2024, in All Saints Church, Rockwell Green

Martin's life, a life of selfless and unconditional service, was characterised by countless acts of kindness which were not always the result of conscious decisions, rather the natural and instinctive consequence of a fundamentally unselfish and loving soul devoted to God and the service of others. At the top of his list were those who were struggling, for whatever reason; in the midst of the Covid crisis he hoped beyond hope (*and I quote Martin*) that 'the world's poorest might not be too adversely affected.'

I have never known someone as universally loved and respected as Martin. Although most of his professional life was spent in the southern part of the country, Martin was, of course, a proud Yorkshireman and north-easterner. His own school days were spent at Pocklington, in the Yorkshire Wolds; then the reading of Theology at King's College, London, and training for the priesthood at St Augustine's, Canterbury, before his first curacy took him back to a parish on the edge of Newcastle, a parish of 30,000 souls in back-to-back terraced housing. This was the land of the early Christian monasteries, at Hexham, Jarrow and Monkwearmouth; the land of early Celtic and Roman Christianity, the time of the Venerable Bede, of Benedict Biscop, Ceolfrith and Cuthbert. This was also the land where over a thousand years later, a tall, young curate in a dog collar would pass down the bus, untouched by the bus conductor, greeted instead with a cheery, 'That's all right, Vicar', and where, on entering the fish-and-chip shop, the Geordie cry would go up: 'It's the Vicar, give him a big fish'.

His school chaplaincies started at Marlborough College, and continued for well over thirty years, with a stint in between as the Domestic Chaplain to the Bishop of Exeter. Three further fine schools followed: Taunton School, Haileybury College and, finally, eleven memorable years at Tonbridge School. Former pupils at Taunton remember his tolerance and understanding, and write that his quiet presence and sympathetic approach had a great influence on the entire school community. They feel that Martin will perhaps be remembered simply for his kindness.

The Haileybury Society describes how Martin touched the lives of many and how he will be remembered with deep affection and gratitude by all those who knew him. There is, of course, something of a gap between the experiences of back-to-back terrace dwellers and the life within a public school, and indeed the lives of those in rural parishes. Martin's genius was to be able to talk with great clarity

and directness (and often with humour) to all people, never preaching in order to induce guilt, or deploy spiritual leverage, but rather to reflect on the values of humility, integrity and selfless service, by being the embodiment of those qualities himself.

At Tonbridge, the boys were in Chapel four times a week, five if you were a boarder, and Martin considered that a key part of his role was to provide the time and opportunity for quiet reflection, not necessarily to provoke a deep, spiritual response, for he knew of course that not all boys listen to every word all of the time, but always to give them twenty minutes of safety and refuge, of protection from the insistent chattering demands of the busy institution, whether it be that imminent block test, that timed essay, that conversation with the Housemaster, those relentless eight period days, the noise, the questions - simply to help them through the stress of growing up in a busy workplace with a thousand other souls.

After Martin had been at Tonbridge School for a while, I asked him how it seemed to him: he replied, 'Tonbridge felt like a great battleship carving through the oceans, with myself as the Second Signals Officer'. Well, I can assure you: this was no episode of 'The Navy Lark' with Sub-Lieutenant Phillips-Beaumont jeopardising the ship: in address after address in Chapel, and in lesson after lesson in his welcoming classroom, Martin showed us all the values of Christian compassion and humility, through his reading of the Scriptures, through personal anecdote, and characters and stories from history, and through the works of a wide range of writers.

Martin himself was extremely well read, and I remember looking at his library in Chiddingstone in awe: philosophy, theology, the classics, everything about the countryside, rewilding and wild swimming, everything about Inspector Rebus by Ian Rankin, all the Aubrey/Maturin series by Patrick O'Brien. Another favourite of Martin's was Professor Eamon Duffy's *The Voices of Morebath*, which, through the surviving parish accounts, tells of the efforts of the rural parish priest, Sir Christopher Trychay, to negotiate the ebbs and flows of Protestantism and Catholicism within his Devon parish for fifty four years in the sixteenth century: I'd back Martin to have survived that time and been just as ecumenically tolerant and successful.

One writer that I know he felt particularly close to, who featured in many addresses, and forms one of today's readings, is the Trappist monk and peace and civil rights activist Thomas Merton. Born in 1915 in the shadow of Mount Canigou, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, Merton worked his way through a varied life towards ordination at The Abbey of our Lady of Gethsemani [sic], part of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the so-called Trappists, with their contemplative lives of near silence, faithful prayer and work.

Martin himself, much taken by many of Merton's writings, went on retreat on a regular basis, and was indeed a man very much drawn to contemplation and the subordination of self to God, but his was a life of contemplative action. There was nothing of the Anchorite recluse about him: Martin loved people. Every boy who walked into chapel received a warm and welcoming smile; his football and rugby teams (particularly the forwards) were enthusiastically driven on, Martin the coach in his characteristic old school Northern rugby shorts – a bit short. I saw quite a bit of Martin in meetings: his contributions were always measured, charitable and constructive...unlike mine.

Whatever Martin's theological and literary interests, one cannot possibly tell the story of his life without acknowledging and honouring someone of incalculable significance to Martin: Ruth. After some amusing near misses in the courtship game, Martin and Ruth were married in 1982. Ruth, of course, has had her own highly successful career as a nursery teacher – well, were I a small child I would certainly mind my ps and qs – and she has also provided the most extraordinary support for Martin, personally and professionally. Not least during a car journey, when you prayed that Ruth would be at the wheel, and Martin – please just sit in the back and concentrate on your sermon. Ruth has been an absolute rock for Martin, with all its Biblical connotations: always at his side, whether literally or metaphorically, always pro-actively helpful, unceasingly loyal, loving and supportive.

That said, Ruth reports that, however close, they were never in each other's pockets. She obviously saw the little foibles close-up, including his bouts of obsessive tidying up, usually when the stresses of upcoming carol services would kick in, and his struggles with technical stuff including remote controls, and his inability to stay awake during evenings but, if she won't mind my saying it, I always felt she joined the rest of us at being slightly in awe of his balancing act: the member of a family with his two brothers, uncle, godfather (to quite a few young people), school chaplain, a teacher, the walker, the amateur actor, the art connoisseur, the cook, the tutor, the rugby coach; and, of course, the dog-owner and dog-walker.

'We have never known a master as universally loved and respected as ours.' This from the obituary section of the Springer Spaniel Times, credited to Ned, Rowan and Ham Beaumont. It continues, 'Apparently, he has been known to raise his voice, occasionally at human boys, but usually at the thing our friends call the television: we do not know what the outbursts mean but they usually went something like, "Oh ref, come on, he was miles off-side."' When he decided to tell us not to do something, we usually obeyed, for a bit, but then we would do it

again, which sort of made him sound cross, but he wasn't really. We think he was a bit of a softie, which we loved'.

After retirement from Tonbridge, Martin and Ruth found their way to Chiddingstone, a village a few miles away from the school, where they spent six very happy years looking after St Mary's and St Luke's. They were much loved by the inhabitants of Chiddingstone and Chiddingstone Causeway, and felt very supported by the long-term, church-going supporters of the parish.

Martin also attracted members of the congregation from a little further afield, all drawn by his kindly and tolerant wisdom, and his unfussy and ungingimicky leading of worship. The word spread, and couples waited to be married by Martin, including one of my daughters.

Eventually, Martin and Ruth returned to Somerset where the parishes of Ashbrittle, Greenham, Stawley, Bathealton and Kittisford benefited from Martin's wonderful pastoral care; and lately he had been appointed priest-in-charge in All Saints Church, Rockwell Green where apparently there was a marvellous exhibition centred on the Turin Shroud, and where Martin worked hard to prevent the spire above us from collapsing. Sadly, those positions were not to be held for longer and he had to leave home for hospital.

Martin liked good food, particularly French, and was himself an accomplished cook. It was touching, and a little amusing, on a visit to Martin in the hospital in Taunton, to find him still taking the occasional sip of red wine – French Pinot Noir – as Ruth fed him his lunch: Martin insistent; wine provided by Ruth – benevolent blind eyes turned by the nurses.

In Ruth and Martin's house, Hilltop, in Milverton, between the kitchen and the glazed conservatory area, there is a tall, narrow bookcase. I was drifting through it a few weeks ago and noticed that it was full of the books on nature that I mentioned earlier: *The Natural History of Selborne* by Gilbert White, *A Shepherd's Life* by W.H. Hudson; and more recent works by Robert MacFarlane, Richard Mabey and Roger Deakin. 7

There was also a volume of poems by the early twentieth century poet, Edward Thomas – a favourite of some of you here, killed in 1917 in France. At that moment of browsing there came to mind a line from one of Martin's favourites, *As the Team's Head Brass*, a lament for the First World War, but also a poem about the resilience of love and friendship, and the possibility of finding meaning in a world in which death seems to have become almost random.

Leaning on the handles of his plough, the ploughman speculates about the death

of his friend, killed in France, and how the world has changed as a result. Yet he continues, 'If we could see all all might seem good.'

This characteristically sanguine reflection of the rural labourer embodies the very powerful idea of providence. It took John Milton a lot of lines of blank verse in *Paradise Lost* in attempting to 'justify the ways of God to Man', and at times it is very hard to see the pattern and the purpose: we feel we are still in amongst the trees and cannot see the wood yet. But Edward Thomas's words do raise the possibility of hope: 'If we could see all all might seem good'.

A sense of hope was something that Martin addressed in the Ashbottle Parish newsletter as the Covid crisis dissipated: the Parish News strap-line was 'The Great Re-opening' and, in his Thought for the Month, Martin wrote: 'The Christian hope, of which St Paul wrote, is firmly rooted in his belief in the providence of God. Beneath and within all that might happen to us in this life, we can discern God's loving presence.'

Martin could remember by heart much of Paul's letter to the Romans, and one of his favourite verses was Romans, chapter 12, verse 12:

'Let your hope keep you joyful. Be patient in all your troubles and pray at all times.'

Martin, if you'll excuse a bit of *Hamlet* from an English teacher: may 'flights of angels sing thee to thy rest'.

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