

I am always reluctant to reproduce a sermon in the written word as it loses the interpretation and expression intended by the author and becomes a bald piece of prose. It also loses some grammatical correctness allowed in the delivery, and refers to more localised references which may not be appreciated by some readers. However, I am confident that its sentiment shows through.

~ Alan Wolstencroft

John Robert Atherton +

Thursday, 7th July 2016 - St Katharine's, Blackrod.

Psalm 16. 4-10 1 Corinthians 13

Almost two years ago John spoke briefly introducing the launch of his latest book, 'Challenging Religious Studies' and, although I'm sure he didn't intend it, his introduction was almost a personal testimony to the driving forces that had steered his life and shaped his theology and his work over so many years.

"It's the best book I've ever written - but only me thinks so", said John in his characteristic way, but he went on to tell, as he does in the book, how he was named after an uncle, John Robert Atherton, who died in 1900 aged 3 months, "and I'm 75", he added.

The poverty and mortality rate of the industrial cities and the town in which John was born, and never forgot, fashioned John's thinking and his life's work as priest, scholar, theologian, teacher, writer, but the personal comments also revealed an underlying deep gratitude for life itself, and to the God who had so richly blessed him.

But it was not just personal gratitude. He rejoiced in the advancements and developments of the last century which had brought an increased standard of living and well being to so many people throughout the world. He was grateful to and for them for, although his life had centered round his beloved Lancashire, he had a global perspective that informed, challenged and stimulated him and, in turn, inspired others. He was far from blind to the inequalities in our society and world, but never-the-less ready to point to the progressive move away from poverty to comparative prosperity whilst still holding with heart felt sadness the inequalities that still exist.

The God in whom John believed had come to bring abundant life to all people, therefore all people were John's concern, so he worked on a social, economic agenda and constantly sought to relate Christianity to those multiplicit secular disciplines that shaped life, all of which he did with a sense of humility, humour and warmth, endearing him to colleagues and to so many friends.

But John was no ivory towers theologian. His sermons here at Blackrod, where he had made his spiritual home in so-called retirement, whilst often

laced with humour maintained the same theme, of rooting and grounding Christian belief in the reality of life.

And he knew about life!

Born into a family that were in John's words 'skint', they nevertheless got enough money together to kit John out for Bolton Grammar School. Then followed his graduation from London School of Economics where surprisingly he informed the family that he was going to train for ordination, which he did at the College of The Resurrection, Mirfield. Sent to Aberdeen, that was in the days when clergy were directed, he was packed off with a travel voucher, a suitcase and no knowledge of the Parish, Aberdeen or Scotland, to serve his first curacy.

John was intent on becoming a Scholastic Monk but a young woman in the Choir had other ideas, and later, with the Bishop's permission, he married Vannie. What a blessing that turned out to be. Vannie, whose Scottish matter of factness and teaching abilities, was able to organise John for the next 47 years till she died some five years ago. Vannie was the loving, practical rock which kept John, and by now the two children, John and Lesley, rooted and grounded.

A further three year curacy, which was the norm then, at St Mark's Bury, was followed by a return to Scotland, to Glasgow and the Gorbals. But, although Scotland became a second love for John, Lancashire had a greater pull. The massive Church of St George, Hulme, set in the midst of one of Manchester's greatest slum clearance programme was no doubt described by a Bishop wanting to fill a vacant post as 'challenging'!

With hardly any congregation and a parish disappearing by the day, John shared with a dispirited people something of the heartache of being uprooted and the break up of communities. His passion for social reform was being re-fashioned by the lives of those around. It was, in John's opinion, ironic that this once redundant Church building should, in recent times, have been converted into luxury apartments. Symbolic of the tremendous changes in the last 50 years.

From Hulme a spell as Industrial Chaplain then on to Manchester Cathedral as Canon Theologian taking up the mantle of Canon Professor Ronald Preston and coupling with it his leadership and work with and for the William Temple Foundation.

We are, I am sure, grateful to Professor Baker for sharing with us something of John's tremendous academic input to Church and Society and to that Foundation. It would take more than time allows to do justice to John's great contribution to those specialised fields in which he worked and in which he strove, not to be specialised, but to be part of the very fabric which makes up our everyday understanding of daily life and the intertwining Christian faith.

Alongside all of this was a man with a very simple philosophy of life, a gratitude, thankfulness and love for family, children and grandchildren, the countryside, industrial history, his friends and colleagues whom he trusted

and respected, his holidays, his unexpected interest in TV sit-coms, which for him reflected much of life, his continuing interest in football having watched through thick and thin, through rain and shine, Bolton Wanderers slip through the divisions at Burnden Park in the 80s & 90s, then sharing from a distance the joy of their return and, more recently, the sadness of their demise.

The Cathedral proved a good base to expand his thinking and work, though he used every opportunity to keep in touch with the parishes and especially those who were up against it. At the Cathedral he was affectionately known as 'Compo', and always needed the vergers to straighten his surplus, scarf and hood, or stole. But that was not surprising as Vannie's best efforts to instill any dress sense into impervious John had miserably failed even, apparently, on Lesley's wedding day.

How John survived as long as he did without being murdered by 'the wife' and the women he teased is a miracle. Jo and Sue, at the Cathedral, the ladies here who he called the 3, I daren't say it, but let's say ladies from Pendle Hill, Margaret, our Churchwarden who was John's firm companion these last few years, Lesley and the grandchildren, all bore the brunt of his wit, and outrageous comments with love and affection.

A man of many and great achievements yet who never quite realised it. Instrumental in so many things, amongst them establishing Local Ordained Ministry whose students he taught whilst, at the same time, teaching in the University. So many students, including Carol and Heather here, and the Hospital Chaplain who administered John's last Communion, remember with gratitude his warmth and understanding, his ability to stand alongside them.

He introduced new curates to the context and history of the Diocese taking them on an unforgettable mini bus tour into the beautiful Pennine Moorlands where the cottage industries of weaving and spinning had spurned the industrial revolution that spread through the valleys by road, rail and canals, on through the growing mill and pit towns of the North West to the city, and ending at what he always referred to as 'London Road Station'.

In all of this he never failed to recognise and help others recognise the influence and place of the Christian Church sometimes just being there in the midst of social change and development.

At the end of the book, as an 'afterword', John takes to heart the concept about 'living in more than one place at once. By that I mean", says John, "being able to see things from a perspective other than ones own, putting oneself into the others' shoes". John certainly did that for he had a deep respect for others, a respect and a perspective that he had seen in the Lord he served.

John's knowledge of scripture enabled him to see that Jesus had this capacity to live in more than one place at once. Jesus it was who shared the divinity of the Father with humanity, bequeathing his Spirit to all, "being in more than one place at once".

Being with us now as in faith, hope, love, and gratitude we say farewell to this loving servant of God, and listen again as John surely echo's the words of the Psalmist,

*The Lord himself is my portion and my cup,
My lot has fallen in a fair land, indeed I have a goodly heritage,
I will bless the Lord who has given me council
I have set the Lord always before me,
He will show me the path of life, in his presence is the fullness of joy and in
his right hand are pleasures for evermore .*

May this good and faithful servant, who enjoyed life in all its complexities, now enjoy that abundance of life which is God's gift and promise to us all.

Amen