

John Perry Funeral address

St Andrew's Church, Surbiton

6th November, 2020

The Reverend Robert Stanier

Gospel means Good news. And the story I'm going to tell, of John's life, is a Good News story.

You will have to bear with me, because, to do him justice, it will be quite a long story, but it's full of good news. And the best bit about it is, however long I speak, I won't come to the end of it. There's just too much to cover in one address. The hard bit is that, for that very reason, that extensive set of contributions and links he has made in his life, means that his sudden parting this life is tough to take.

John was born in 1953, the only child of Jack and Mary. Jack and Mary had met through the Teddington Theatre Club. Mary was eleven years younger, and had started doing amateur dramatics; at a rehearsal in late 1945, everything stopped when news got round that Jack, who had been a stalwart member of the club in the Thirties, had returned from the war: having been left on the beach just the wrong side of Dunkirk in 1940, he had spent five years as a German Prisoner of War.

Whether it was his humour or his dramatic entrance onto the scene, he won Mary over and they were married in 1950. John was born in 1953 two days before the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth. It had been a complicated birth, and so it was clear from the off that John would be an only child, and Mary absolutely doted on him. It was a happy, stable childhood. Jack was an accountant for Kingston Council and then the CEGB up in town; Mary was at home, and crucial to our story, she arranged for piano lessons for John and then singing lessons from a Mr Perkins.

Donald Perkins, as well as being a music teacher, was the Director of Music at St Andrew's church, and actually he is the reason we are *here* today. For in what proved to be a master stroke, of lasting benefit to this church, he suggested that John should join the choir of St Andrew's, Surbiton as a boy chorister. John never left.

His first school meanwhile was Bridgeman Infants, now Collis School, after which he passed the 11+ and went up to Hampton, the grammar school, with his great friend David Griffiths. He enjoyed all of school life, especially sport, where he was a goalkeeper in the football team and an allrounder in the cricket team. On leaving school, he was awarded the Fitzwhygram Prize for the best allround contribution to the school of all the boys in his year.

He joined Teddington Cricket Club aged fifteen and developed a taste, which never left him, for fielding very close to the bat, either at short leg, or also gully. At one point, it also gave him a broken nose when his hands didn't quite move up fast enough as the ball was travelling through the air.

That didn't put him off.

And as with St Andrew's, once he'd started at Teddington, he essentially never left; he played actively for 41 years and was still a vice president of the club when he died.

Thus, two building blocks of his life were begun but there were two others soon following. He already had decided that he didn't want to go away to do a degree. So he found a law course at Ealing Technical College, which meant he could keep singing at St Andrew's and keep playing cricket at Teddington. He lived at home, and drove around in a mini.

In his first week at Ealing, he noted there was a chance to join the college choir. He was the only tenor, and there he drew the attention of the choir director, Donald Cashmore, who invited him to join the City of London Choir.

In a sense, that isn't significant. It's easier to note down the choirs John hasn't sung with than list the ones he has, but crucially, this was where he met Rosemary, whose mother had seen an advertisement in the Telegraph which showed they were auditioning singers for the City of London choir.

Their first concert was in Autumn 1972 and the singers would go to the pub after rehearsals, where Rosemary and John spotted they had the same sense of humour.

John had a friend who happened to have two spare tickets for a concert at the Wigmore Hall which he couldn't use, and offered them to John. John worked out who'd enjoy that concert and so he asked Rosemary to join him. For two people who would love singing all their lives, it was a perfect venue for their first date. Except they never made it. John's Mini broke down at Hyde Park Corner. He managed to steer it into a garage, and then patched it up enough that, if they didn't move out of second gear, he could get all the way back to Teddington. That's how the date panned out, and that's how Rosemary met his family.

Their second date wasn't much better. John had invited Rosemary to go to a Greek restaurant, but the problem was that it clashed with the Cricket Club AGM, so he sent Rosemary ahead to the restaurant with his parents for company and then joined them afterwards once the AGM was finished. In a way, you could say that Rosemary knew what she was getting into.

After graduation, he needed to do his articles; he probably could have chosen to join a firm in the city, but John's logic was that it was better to get a local firm, rather than waste time on the train. Through a contact of Rosemary's, he became the articled clerk to John Palmer. John Palmer and John Perry got on very well and John Palmer saw in our John that his easy-going way with people would bring clients in to the business. He was right.

And so in 1978 he joined the firm full time straight after getting his articles. Again, for there is a pattern, he never left.

He bought a house in Bridgeman Road in Teddington, because that meant he could be near his parents, he could get to the office, and he could walk to and from the cricket club.

I've only just passed by one major event, which is that in September 1977 John and Rosemary were married at All Saints, Woodford Wells, where Rosemary was from. Before going off to honeymoon in Ireland, they had booked to stay the night in a fancy hotel in London. They got to the bedroom, and John turned the TV on to find a very exciting finish to the Gillette Cup final at Lord's, so he watched that.

Later that evening, Rosemary went to the bathroom and came out ready for bed on what was after all their wedding night. By now it was dark so the Gillette Cup final had finished, but as it happened, Michael Parkinson was interviewing Geoffrey Boycott, so John watched that. I'm sure he turned the television off in the end.

But in a sense, a lot of the pattern of his future life was now set. He was married to Rosemary, he was a solicitor at Palmers, he was singing regularly, at St Andrew's on a Sunday but elsewhere in the week, he was playing cricket at Teddington, and he was sinking pints. Tom was born in 1981 and Lucy was born in 1982 but they didn't change the pattern so much as get absorbed into it.

Tom recalls that, as a boy, John would write out a diary at the start of the year, listing out all the events he was committed to, and the rest of any family events would need to be worked around that.

If he hadn't had the support of Rosemary, he couldn't have done it. But then, he did have her support, and so they were an amazing team.

These commitments did mean that he wasn't always at home: in weekday evenings, Tom recalls, "He was always out at a meeting."

It doesn't mean he didn't love his family. He did, and he loved in time being a grandparent to Emily and Robyn. But he had a knack of ensuring that his family were net contributors to his other involvements. His work too: Palmers Solicitors was a base for much more than just a local law firm. Its photocopier must have copied significantly more English choral music than any other firm in England.

And these other bodies, these myriad evening events and meetings, are where many of you who are here, online or in church, will know John from.

For I have never, in all my life, in ministry and before, come across anyone who was involved with so many different organisations. He was the social secretary of the Surrey law Society walking conference, he was a trustee of Welcare, as it became detached from Southwark Diocese, he was a governor at Kingston College for 34 years, he was Father Christmas for the Mayor's Charity each year for decades; a foundation trustee of the Landmark Arts Centre, and now I'll just have to start listing a few organisations as different people will know what he did: The Kingston Town Centre Management Board, the Kingston Museum and Heritage Service, the Kingston Heritage Trust, the Surrey History Trust, the William Rous Cancer Unit Appeal at Kingston Hospital, the Shiraz Mirza Community Hall Trust, the Kingston Music and Arts Trust. And you know what, however many organisations I list I will have missed some out. In the letters of condolence that have been written to Rosemary, there are references to TCC, CC21, TTV, and so many more acronyms that I can't mention them all, though I probably oughtn't to miss out two particularly long lasting and involving commitments.

- the Bridgeman singers, who were a sort of impromptu cathedral back up choir squad, a bit like the 'A Team', but for evensong: they have brought huge joy to so many singers and worshippers

- and his involvement in Hampton School.

He held his last meeting as Chair of Governors at Hampton literally in hospital, when the Thursday before he died, he and Kevin Nibbs the current headteacher, laid out a plan for succession and the future.

He enjoyed all of these different roles, but I understand this one in particular meant a lot to him,

- it drew on all his difference experience, legal and community-wide,

- it was a kind of full circle in that he'd drawn a huge amount out of his time at school,

- and it came to him at a time when the school needed just the kind of expertise and measured intelligence he could give.

He also had a terrific relationship with the headteacher. Kevin cannot be here today as he is self isolating but I would like to draw on something that Kevin wrote in a school newsletter to parents that was sent out on Monday:

"In my view, the essence of Hampton is our boys' distinctive blend of aspiring to personal best while carrying their talents lightly and supporting those around them with kindness. John was the epitome of these values and qualities, as he amply demonstrated throughout his illustrious 56-year association with our School as pupil, Old Hamptonian, parent, Governor and Chairman. I have benefitted from many privileges as Headmaster of our wonderful School, but none greater than being able to work closely, collaboratively and joyfully alongside John Perry as our Chairman."

I think that captures something of the respect with which John was held, but also the fact that he was fun to be with. He was a funny person. While he was good at planning things, he also enjoyed it when things didn't go to plan. He wasn't short of telling stories, Sue Blenkinsopp wrote this in a letter to Rosemary:

"There was a journey once - you and John gave me a lift somewhere, and I asked John a question about cricket. After about a twenty minute answer, you turned round to me and said 'are you sure you meant to ask that question Sue'? So much fun. You were a wonderful pair."

Overall, John wanted to help people. That was a guiding principle of his life. Many, many of the tributes that have been written to Rosemary mention some supportive act or other that John did for people at a certain time in their lives.

And the other thing, probably the totally unique thing, is that with his situation, and job, being in the same place, Kingston, such a constant presence over so many years, knowing so many people and organisations, that he was able to make links that nobody else could. And he did it brilliantly. I will come to one in a bit, but this is where the end comes too soon.

He had planned his retirement, he was going to retire next summer, and then spend more time with Rosemary at their second home in Somerset. But in August he had a stroke, and while the doctors investigated that, they uncovered an aggressive cancer, which proved impossible to treat. He died just over a fortnight ago in Parkside hospital.

And it's from that time that I'll draw on an example of John at work. It was on a journey home from hospital when Lucy was driving him back to Teddington, that he pointed out an extension in Tiffin school which they were driving past. And he said quietly, "I helped build that."

What emerged had happened was this. The background was that he must have known, just because he knew a lot about Kingston, that the school needed a new library facility and then a client came to him, saying that she had inherited money that she wanted to give away to a cause that made sense for her. John gave it some thought, knew she was passionate about education and then pointed her in the direction of that school.

I don't want to overplay it. It's not that John had the money himself; he wasn't seeking to put his name on the building. He just spotted the connection, created the bridge and let the other people complete the job. And there it is, a Rotunda Library at Tiffin School. He wasn't even a Governor there, but he knew it would help.

Maybe the money would have got there anyway. Maybe that link would have been made. But maybe not. John was knitting our community together in a way for the good.

Another foolish example, but it's close to my heart. John fielded in the close catching position of short leg in cricket. Now the curious thing about cricket is that we love statistics for batting and bowling – they are where the glory lies – but while catching is just as important, and it gets a side note in a scorebook, it doesn't really get as much credit: it's somehow typical of John that this was the area John excelled. Other people's names shone in lights, but he was the one who helped the team.

A less stupid example, because it's very close to this spot. John loved singing in a choir. He didn't normally do the conducting, though he could. He didn't especially relish the limelight of a solo, although he could do it. He loved the music happening, and if he thought he could make it happen, he made it happen; he was utterly dependable.

Once he'd committed, he'd committed, and the lucky thing for this church is that he committed in 1961 and we've been blessed by his presence ever since.

I told you this was a Good News story.

When you've made so many contributions, it's leaving a gap in just so many places. The links that John has made just can't be replaced.

He had a low key, almost pragmatic spirituality. As he said to me at the end, "I still have my faith, just about". The Psalm was one he chose: "I will sing unto the Lord, as long as I live: I will praise my God while I have my being." And the Nunc Dimittis that Andy (and Cathy) will sing is one he chose and it's utterly appropriate.

Not many people sang such a wide repertoire as John. He must have sung the English church canon, and there are probably greater pieces, but this is right for here, today. It's a classic English piece. It's a Nunc Dimittis, which if you are not familiar with church life is a canticle, words taken from the Bible, and a setting of these words is sung at every Evensong. And in his time John sang a lot of evensongs.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word... and so on.

John served this church, and he served so many people, and he sang with us to the end. Janet Jones is another long-time member of the choir here and she wrote this, in a letter to Rosemary.

“On a personal note, I owe John a lot: Fred may have taught me to sing Evensong, but apart from Rosy and Jenny two friends in the OU choir, there is no-one else I would rather sing beside than John. Maybe I will again one day.”

You know what, Janet, maybe one day you will.

Amen.

Other quotations unable to include from letters to Rosemary

“So he kept our standard of performance high in an agreeable way, leading with his own good singing.”

“John always had a droll twinkle.”

“The immediate shock and unhappiness at his parting cannot diminish the joy of knowing him for so many years, or the pleasure of his company. Yet another dear friend will be there to guard us and watch over all we do. I am grateful that I shall not hear the comments!! My happiest memory is of you two as a real couple, sharing and giving so much. I have been extremely lucky to share so many treasured moments.”

“He always played to win but, whatever the outcome, he demonstrated those qualities of magnanimity and dignity in the way that he conducted himself afterwards. He was the best possible team player and never lost his delightful, self-deprecating humour when things did not go according to plan.

“My hunch is that he carried these wonderful attributes with him into every aspect of his personal and business life. He was in every sense of the term “a gentle man”.”

“Apart from all the great work that he - and you - did for the SLS, Walking Conference, Surrey Law Club and other groups, I will always remember his warmth, kindness and generosity.”

“I never knew anyone whose diary was so full and eclectic - from clients to music - from churches to sports clubs.”

“John’s contribution to the Mayor’s Charitable Trust as a Trustee has been immense over the years”

“John took me under his wing...”

“I think, however, that as much as John’s friendship meant to me personally, the thing that I will remember most about him is the example he set when it came to giving back. He was never interested in maximising what he could extract from the profession or from his clients, he was always far more concerned with what he could give back and that shone through in his time with SLS and as our Law Society Council Member. He was an example to us all and it is now incumbent on the rest of us to try as best we can to live out what we learned from John so that we look after the profession and practise in its very best traditions as he did.”

“While living in the same postcode all his life, he packed in more to his years than most of us ever will and he will be greatly missed.”