

Royston Grosvenor

1 Thess 4:13-end
John 14:1-6

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Royston, as you might have expected, left a number of fairly clear instructions about his funeral. Those included a complete order of service - that which you have in front of you - with some interesting and I think probably quite deliberate choices in it. He also told Richard, as well as David and Pat, that there was *not* to be a eulogy at his funeral; rather than the preacher was to preach a *sermon*. It seems that Royston had attended a funeral with quite a lot of eulogies included, and this caused him to be quite clear that he didn't want that sort of 'going-on' at his funeral.

Now Royston was the boss, as far as I'm concerned. From the moment he took me under his wing as a teenager exploring the vocation to ordination, through my selection process, my training, my curacy and beyond, he was always the boss. And he is my boss today still. So I'm going to do my best to be obedient.

But I do think I've found a workaround. A way of talking about our friend, our priest, our brother, husband, uncle, father, pastor, whilst still fulfilling his request for this to be about God and not about him. I'm going to let Royston preach the sermon at his own funeral.

I am appalling when it comes to remembering sermons. I think I only remember a handful. But one of the sermons that I can remember is one of Royston's. Midnight Mass, in Tidenham

Church, in his final incumbency. 1998 I reckon. Maybe a year earlier or later. I can picture it clearly. 'What is God like?', asked Royston to his congregation? 'What is God like?', and then he answered, 'he is like his Son.'

I've never forgotten that sermon. What is God like? He is like his Son.

Royston looked to Christ. As a man, as a priest, he looked to Christ, and when he saw Christ he knew what God was like. And he wanted us to know that too. And this funeral service that he has so carefully put together just preaches that exact same message. From the lighting of the Paschal Candle, that reminds us that the light never goes out, to the hymns that tell of the kindly Shepherd, and of the risen conquering Son of Easter morning, to the readings themselves, Royston is still preaching to us even now that if we want to know about God, we need only meet him in his Son. And so it is of no surprise at all that we are asked to break bread together today. To meet Christ in the most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, as Royston did so regularly, and indeed did, with Father David, for the last time just very shortly before he died.

In many ways I think of course Royston is quite right to try to suppress too much eulogising at an event like this, because actually of course all of us gathered here are his living biography. I knew him only for part of his life, from 1997 onwards when he arrived as our vicar. So my memories are of vicarage garden parties, of his careful, prayerful liturgical ministry. Of his knowledge, which I would raid regularly when I was an incumbent myself, picking up the phone to ask whether I was doing something right. I still have the copy of the book he gave me I was learning to celebrate the Eucharist. My memories are of his capacity to be absolutely focused and solemn in

liturgical moments, but roaring his head off with laughter in the vestry five minutes before or after. My memories are of travelling with him to the Holy Land. Of never-ending sherry sessions. Of being one of a multitude of vocations to a range of ministries that he nurtured in Tidenham. But that's just a snapshot of a life; all of us here have the work set before us of forming a complete biography, a living eulogy. And we can start that today. I learned things a few days ago when I sat with David and Pat that I never knew before. Including the charming story of how Royston and Pat met, about the fact he kept a journal, and of his seemingly magical capacity to holiday in the place that, the following year, he would become vicar of. And all of you will have those kinds of stories, and our work is to tell them, and to live his biography.

What is God like? He is like his Son. And it is the Son of God towards whom Royston would have us look today. The passage from the first letter to the Thessalonians, which of course was written really pretty early in the development of the church, wants to tell us about hope. It is a passage about dying, and grieving. But it is also a passage about hope. 'We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.' The burning candle of Easter, the broken bread and the outpoured wine, and the prayers that we will say at the commendation are all pointing towards Christ. Of course we grieve. If we didn't that would be utterly bizarre. We have lost our friend, our priest, our father, husband, brother, uncle. There is a hole now, in our life. Of course we grieve. But we do not grieve 'as others do who have no hope.'

And that is because we know Christ. 'The dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive, will be caught up in the clouds together with them... and so we will be with the Lord for ever.'

Bereavement strikes all of us differently, and it changes from day to day, from minute to minute. But at the heart of it is utter confusion, lack of stability, disorientation, chaos.

Royston is telling us that the key to finding our way on this dark path of grief is not a plan, or scheme, or strategy (indeed he was always rather suspicious of initiatives, perhaps because he was always rather suspicious of Bishops too!). The key is not a plan. The key is a person. St Thomas says to Jesus, 'Lord we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' And don't we feel that, when someone we love dies, and they seem to go where we cannot follow? And our Lord doesn't give him a map, or a flowchart. He gives him a person. He gives Thomas himself: '*I am the way.*' Those of us who were in church last Sunday will have heard something very similar when Jesus says, 'I am the gate'. I am the person who connects where we are with where we are going. And that extends beyond the grave. That extends into the communion of saints, in whose number Royston now takes his place. There is nowhere where we can go that God is not already present. There is no experience that we can bear, even the depth of grief, where Christ does not go with us. Because he is the way. Because he is the gate.

Our first reading ended with the words, 'therefore encourage one another with these words.' It feels like a paradox, to be asked to be encouraged at a funeral. But it isn't. Because we are shown the gate. Because we are shown the way. Because we are assured, in St Paul's words, 'we will be with the Lord forever.'

And so the boundary is thin, because we can see what God is like. And in a moment we can receive that hope, that way, that gate, into our hands as we come to the altar, as Royston did week by week, faithfully turning to Christ, holding out our

hands to receive another symbol, a Sacrament, that tells us what God is like.

A gate between this world and the next. A way that leads us home. A hope that speaks to us in grief. What is God like? He is like his Son.

And so now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, dominion, glory and power, world without end. Amen.