

250 Home Communion.

Every other Wednesday for the last ten years

I have taken Barbara Communion in her home
in Elm Green.

A veritable marathon,
but a privilege never a chore.

Multiply the 250 by the ten minutes chat
we had after the service
and you get 2500 minutes of talking,
small talk and big talk.

As we give thanks for Barbara this morning
I simply want to share with you
some traits that struck me forcibly.

The first is Barbara's compassion.

Although she was virtually housebound,

she wasn't out of touch.

Far from it,
she always seemed to hear the news,
from national and international
to local gossip
long before me.

She was a marvellous mine of information.

Part of it was to do with the network of home-helps,
who were very kind to her,
and kept her informed.

Part of it was her devotion to Radio York:
she must have been their most faithful listener,
virtually 24/7.

But all this meant that she knew what was going on.

And from her bungalow
a wave of compassion,

a wave of prayer
went out to all the sorry situations she heard about.
'Ee, poor souls.'

She didn't have an easy childhood
nor an easy life.
Starting at Whitby and Aislaby,
then moving to York,
her dad was at sea,
in more senses than one,
and Barbara and her elder sister Hilda
and her younger sister Margaret
were brought up virtually single-handed
by their mother.

Mother was very loving and hard-working
but very strict.

And yet in that seemingly harsh environment,

Barbara flourished,
establishing a close and happy bond with her sisters,
which remained unto death and beyond.
Barbara often asked me to pray for Hilda,
dying of cancer,
and for Margaret,
wracked by Parkinsons.
They weren't just names to me,
she told me how lovely they were,
and we prayed together for them,
before their deaths and after.
Barbara was so deeply grateful to Margaret's husband Ron,
for all his care,
not just of Margaret,
but for all three sisters.

Barbara's compassion was timeless.O

On the wall of her living room,
which was a sort of shrine,
there was a large and beautiful picture
of a Lancaster bomber,
flying over the Wash.
We were never sure whether it was coming home
or at the start of its mission,
but we talked of all the brave airmen.
Like Vera Lynn,
Barbara had clearly been the Forces sweetheart,
a dear friend to so many of the airmen
stationed around York,
grieving for those who never came back.
One of her precious possessions was a charred ripchord,
a pilot who had bailed out but
had been burnt to death on his descent.
We often prayed for today's Armed Forces,

and her rheumy eyes filled with tears,
tears of compassion.

The second quality I noticed over the years was her love,
love for Michael and Ian her boys,
which was deep and fierce.
Love for Diane and Jeremy,
Heather and Hayley
her grandchildren,
their photos brightening her room.
She was so proud of them,
kept up with all their hopes, their achievements,
particularly pleased
for Diane and Jeremy,
for their respective marriages.
Love for all her nephews and nieces,
thrilled to celebrate her special birthday with all the family

at Christmas 2006 –

Barbara's will forbids me to mention her age –

but didn't all Helmsley rejoice to see her

being wheeled around the town

with that balloon with 80 on it,

and such a smile!

She loved her family,

but her love didn't stop there,

she was very fond of,

very caring for friends and neighbours too.

The third quality was her wisdom.

She was a truly wise woman,

had a good knowledge of poetry,

many poems she could recite by heart,

a good needlewoman,

be it tapestry or knitting,

a broad musical knowledge,

classical music,

folk singers,

even pop.

There was a richness there which I respected.

She was rooted,

in York and Helmsley,

but could rise above her roots

and be very broad in her sympathies.

One Wednesday

I was going on to visit the Archbishop of York

immediately after giving Barbara her communion.

Many old people have views on our charismatic archbishop,

are little short of prejudiced

about a Ugandan leading our church.

Not Barbara.

'When you see him, tell him I think he's simply wonderful,'

she asked.

And I did.

And he beamed.

Barbara could make people beam,

from the lowest to the highest.

The fourth quality was her faithfulness.

We used the old Prayer Book for Communion,

and each fortnight there was a beautiful reading

from the Gospels.

Year by year at 15 Elm Green

we heard of dead daughters of Jairus being raised,

prodigal sons returning and being welcomed home,

good Samaritans tending Jews wounded by the wayside,

water being turned into wine,

hungry crowds being fed,

virgins giving birth in a cowshed,

sons of God being crucified.

She always listened raptly,

then usually made some comment,

‘how lovely,’

that sort of thing;

never throw away lines –

she always meant it very deeply.

I never felt I ministered to her,

Barbara actually ministered to me

by her faithfulness.

She was one

of the most generous supporters of the church here,

generous with her donations and her devotion.

It was a faith which she held on to despite adversity,

tremendous adversity.

Or rather faith and adversity

seemed more in harmony with each other
rather than in battle with each other.

Her faith seemed to see her through adversity
and enable her not just to cope but to flourish.

The rheumatoid arthritis was wretched,
afflicting her soon after she moved to Helmsley
with Mike
and Michael and Ian
forty five years ago –
they started in Elmslac Road
but soon moved to a house in Ashdale Road
which was easier for Barbara to cope with.

She bore tremendous sorrow as well as the pain.
Sorrow that her marriage to Mike had ended.
Sorrow at the illness and death of her sisters.

It is very fitting that her funeral is on Maundy Thursday,
the day before Good Friday,

because like her Lord before her
she bore many wounds and afflictions.

But they never overwhelmed her.

There was an Easter about her life
as well as a Good Friday.

That's the final quality I would like to mark.

Despite her massive handicaps,
Barbara was an Easter person,
with all the fun of Easter.

She loved her food –
we often talked about what she was having for lunch,
and even the simplest fare
made my mouth water when she described it.

She could have got a Grade A A-level
on the pie shops of Helmsley
and how they weren't as good as they used to be,

spoiling steak pies with all these fancy sauces.
She had a sweet tooth,
had worked in Thorntons Chocolate Cabin
in York as a girl,
which must have been heaven for Barbara,
and their special toffee was still her favourite.
On Boxing Day
her birthday
she often used to entertain her family,
delight them
by donning fancy dress,
guitars,
grass skirts,
blond wigs,
dark glasses,
swaying with joy as Hawaii came to Helmsley on Boxing Day.

Her favourite food was battered scampi,
cooked to perfection by a hotel near Whitby
her day centre used to visit.
It had to be battered, never breaded,
and even after her death,
last Tuesday I found myself scouring the freezers in Tesco's
looking for battered Scampi for Barbara.

Barbara was a simply wonderful person,
faithful unto death.
She had a certain tenacity which enabled her to cope
with her illness
which lesser souls would have been overwhelmed by.
That tenacity could be fierce at times –
I was late for the first of my 250 communions with her,
and she told me in no uncertain terms
what she thought about late vicars.

Yet I admired that fierce tenacity –
with it came a certain honesty,
straight talking which I valued.

She'd tell you to your face,
never behind your back.

All those qualities we pass on to God today,
thanking him for them all,
thanking him for Barbara.

We commend Barbara to his care, to paradise.

Our Lord loved his food,
most of the Gospel stories involve marvellous meals,
today,

Maundy Thursday,

we think of our Lord having a special last supper
with his friends.

I can imagine Barbara this day

having her first supper with her Lord,
who like her was a lover of fish,
fish caught on Galilee.

I imagine heaven being like a marvellous banquet,
with Barbara being served her favourite Scampi
by our Saviour.

I can see her smile,
positively beatific,

and then I can hear her,

'Jesus,

I just hope you've coated these with batter
and not breadcrumbs!'

A few moments of reflection

as we hear Barbara's favourite piece,

'I'll walk with God'

from the Student Prince.