

**A sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry at the funeral of Philip
Townshend on 9th November 2015
At Coventry Cathedral**

Reading: Matthew 25.31-46

It is not my normal practice to choose a reading for a funeral that talks about the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels! I have done so today because I thought it would bring a smile to Phil. He sometimes said to me that there should be more fire and brimstone preaching in churches to really spice up our services. I always told him: you could be one of my best preachers, Phil. And if I may, Kirstie, I say the same to you. You have your father's passionate and compelling way of speaking. Not only your words but you, yourself, are the finest tribute to him.

I chose this reading mainly, though, because it says something about Phil's Christian faith. It was a faith he talked to me about on a number of occasions. Invariably he would say something like, 'I know I'm not a good Christian really, and I don't go to church as often as I should, but...'. And then he would go on to quote a story of Jesus, often the good Samaritan or something similar, and say how much he believed in Jesus' vision for human life and in the way Jesus calls us to live our lives for other. His Christian faith, as Councillor Abdul Khan has shown, inspired his high regard for all the faith communities of Coventry; it was a faith that they saw in him and also regarded highly.

Our reading is one of Jesus' most poignant parables – one of his most powerful stories. There are people lining up, knocking on heaven's door. And they meet Jesus, who says to them, 'when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me a drink; when I was a stranger you welcomed me.' To the others he said, 'when I was naked, you did not give me clothing; when I was sick or in prison, you did not visit me.'

Then they replied to Jesus, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?' And Jesus answered, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it – or did not do it – to the least of these, you did it – or did not do it – to me.'

Phil's faith was like that. He saw people suffering from injustice, poverty, helplessness and he reached out to them to help them: and to help them not just with fine words or donations of money (though he did both of those) but through action, through galvanising others and, as we have already heard of today, through effecting change. Hundreds of people here will be able to tell their own stories of Phil doing just that. My story is about the Coventry Winter Night Shelter which Kirstie has already mentioned and which Phil generously designated as the recipient of our collection today.

One Monday morning a couple of years ago, Phil had arranged to come to see me. I'd spent a bit of time researching what he wanted to discuss and I was ready for our discussion. But by the time he arrived – and he was of course (Ann!) a little

late – Phil’s heart and mind had moved on. He’d spent the previous Friday night, together with his friend and colleague, Councillor Ed Ruane, with the police, seeing what they get up to at night around the city. I think he had wanted to see that the police were handling everything professionally, and had probably expected to see a bit of trouble along the way. In fact, what he saw was how the police spent much of their time caring for the homeless people who lived on the streets.

Phil was very moved by what he saw. Tears were in his eyes as he told me about an elderly lady without a roof over her head, taking shelter in a doorway. ‘We can’t let this happen,’ he told me, ‘we can’t’, quoting the bible, ‘just walk by on the other side.’ He explained that these people were beyond the reach of the Council, that he didn’t have the statutory powers to help them. ‘But,’ he said, ‘the Church and the faith communities can surely do something about it! If you take the lead, then we will be behind you all the way, and acting together we can do something to make a difference.’

I have to confess, I was at a loss for what we could do, especially in so short a time. But Phil wouldn’t let it drop. He had smelt the stench of suffering, and the scent of the justice that might be brought instead. To cut a long story short, within a couple of months, the churches, supported in a most wonderful way by the Sikh community, many good people of Coventry from different faith positions and those of no religious faith, and the Council itself, had set up a Night Shelter which is running again this winter for the third year and which Phil designated as the recipient of the collection taken today.

Kirstie, you spoke superbly, and incredibly movingly about your father and about your beautiful relationship. We’ve heard about the way you shared an affection for Les Miserables together and we’ve listened to Phil’s favourite song from the production. It’s a song that follows perhaps the most touching scene in the production, when the dying Jean Valjean hands his beloved adopted daughter Cosette a piece of paper with his last confession written on it – ‘the story’, he says, ‘of a man who only learned to love when you were in his keeping’.

Dear Kirstie, everybody knows that Phil’s love for you was as immense as it was unending. You were always on his mind and in his heart. You would always figure in his conversations. His love for you was – and remains – a very profound love. You’ve reminded us of the scene of the angelic figure saying with the Bishop, ‘love is everlasting’, and I am sure you can hear Jean Valjean joining with her as he walks towards the gate of heaven singing, ‘and remember the truth that once was spoken, to love another person is to see the face of God’. And I say to you, remember me, this bishop, saying to you again, ‘remember the truth that once was spoken, to love another person is to see the face of God’.

Your father’s love for you was intense, unique and unrivalled, and yet that same love was reflected in his passion to see other people lifted to their true dignity as human beings. It was the force behind his outrage when he saw people denied justice or deprived of shelter or driven from their lands by war to seek refuge in

our city. It was a love for human beings that first turned him to the law and then to local politics as he refused to walk by on the other side.

As Phil looked at those who suffered, something deep inside him stirred. He saw in them something of the face of God – a human being, loved into being by the God of love, yet who was being deprived of the full dignity of the life that God had for them. As he reached out to them, so he was expressing in a very profound way the heart of the Christian faith – to reach out to the Christ who is to be found in the suffering people of the world and making Jesus' words a reality: 'as you did it to the least of these, so you did it to me.' It was this love for others and for the betterment of them and this city that was the expression of his Christian faith.

Phil's coffin is engraved with a scene of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. Kirstie told me that she chose it because it rang true to her father who would 'give his last bit of bread to another person'. A great banquet is one of the images we have of heaven. It's sometimes imagined as a banquet with the most marvellous spread of food, where each person has a long spoon which they are using to feed the person next to them. And it's often compared to an image of hell with the same banquet and the same spoons: but there the people are using the long spoons to feed only themselves, and they find they cannot do it and so, they get thinner and begin to starve and then start using the long spoons to hit each other so that they can grab the food from each other's plates.

Phil Townshend believed this city could be a glimpse of heaven where we all – regardless of political belief or religious position – work together for the good of all people. As we commend him to the heavenly banquet, let us commit ourselves, in his honour, to bringing heaven to earth in our city. And let us sing the next hymn with gusto, as Phil would have done, that we 'will not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.'

Amen.