

Graeme Pringle

It's Saturday morning and the desperately sad news of Graeme Pringle's death has come through. It was not unexpected. He had a cardiac arrest last week. For the first few days there were slim hopes and many prayers for recovery. But by early this week it seemed clear that death would be the inevitable result within a few days. He was only 67.

All week long a line of poetry has been running through my head: 'soonest our best men with thee do go'. Graeme was one of the 'best men'.

He and I went back a long way, to when we were both in our early twenties, fresh from university. We briefly formed a not very skilful defensive partnership for the church football team. Later, our lives kept intertwining. He was vicar in the neighbouring parish to mine and then became Director of Diocesan Communications after I, too, had moved from parish ministry to a diocesan role. More recently we'd become honorary canons at the Cathedral in which we'd both been ordained. We were friends, though not really close ones. Our interests were fairly different, but there was always a deep mutual trust born of many years' shared history, and the knowledge that we could rely on each other when needed. I feel his loss keenly. We last spent significant time together last Autumn, when we had a cup of tea and a long talk together. I had it in mind to do the same again shortly, when the terrible news came through last week of the cardiac arrest.

Graeme wasn't, as far as I remember, a great devotee of poetry. Though if I'd put a poem on his desk or emailed it to him he would have given it his attention and (usually!) a quizzical and low-key response. The line 'soonest our best men with thee do go' is from John Donne's sonnet, 'Death, be not proud'. Donne speaks to Death as if it were a person, and though the poem is often read quite forcefully, I have always felt that it should be delivered in a quiet, gentle, almost pastoral tone. Donne speaks to 'poor Death', with some sympathy for this creature which others call 'mighty and dreadful', and says, 'for thou art not so.' He asks, 'why swellst thou then?' His point is that Death is not, after all, final. 'One short sleep past, we wake eternally/And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.'

Death, the stealer of life, does not realise, according to Donne, that it is not truly to be feared. For, 'soonest our best men with thee do go - /Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.' Why do the best go so readily? Because, says Donne, they know they go before us into an eternal waking in the presence of God. I know that Graeme believed that to be true.

This morning as I hear that my friend is dead, some further words of John Donne come into my head. Words I sometimes use at funerals over a coffin. Not poetry this time but from a sermon:

Even he whom we call dead is alive this day.

In the presence of God

we lay him down.

In the power of God

he shall rise.

In the person of Christ

he is risen already.

Dear Graeme, may you rest in peace and rise in glory.