

The Late Garth Hutton. St Thomas on The Bourne, October 18th, 2019

About two thousand five hundred years ago, give or take a few centuries either way, a number of individuals began to write some poems. We don't know the names of the individuals, nor do we know in detail where they lived, except that it was probably in Israel or, for some of the poets, it might have been in Babylon in what is now Iraq. They lived at widely differing times spread across at least four or five centuries, and it wasn't until about 200 BC that their poems which, up to then had been in small, separate collections, were finally brought together in one 'book'.

In spite of having been written across a large expanse of time the poems had one thing in common: each of them was about God; who he was; what he was like; and what his relationship was with his chosen people. We know those poems today as the Psalms.

Unsurprisingly, given that the poets lived in the harsh and mountainous land of Israel, when they came to describe God, they used metaphors drawn from the landscape in which they lived. So they described God as a rock and a fortress. And, because their political circumstances were frequently uncertain, they also referred to God as a shield and a defender, a mighty King, a battling warrior.

The language they used was freighted with imagery which, like the landscape, was often hard and uncompromising. But just occasionally the words strike an entirely different note: they talk of peace, of withdrawal, of rest.

Just listen to these words from Psalm 19: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

The contrast between that verse and all those hard geological and political images is striking.

Now you may be wondering why I have begun my sermon at Garth's Memorial Service by talking about the poetry of the Psalms. I do so for two reasons:

Firstly, because if you have ever had the privilege of being near Garth when he was preparing himself for worship here at St Thomas', you would have seen a man whose deep Christian faith was rooted in stillness and quietness. He didn't draw attention to himself; he was entirely unostentatious, but to see him with his head bowed in prayer or with his hands outstretched to receive the bread and wine of Communion was to recognise a man who walked humbly with God.

Now consider his name. 'Garth' was absolutely appropriate for him. The word 'garth' refers to an inner courtyard, often a lawned area in the centre of a cloistered quadrangle. His faith was exactly like that: forget the soaring spires and glorious windows of Gothic cathedrals, instead just bring to mind a sunlit cloister, where people can stroll and meditate and mull things over.

That was Garth's faith: it was for him, a place of refreshment and peace where the noise and haste of the world was put to one side for a moment and his soul could think about the things of eternal worth.

And the second reason I chose to talk about the Psalms in relation to Garth is because there was about him something of the craggy ruggedness of those poems. As a Bank Manager here in Farnham, Garth brought to that task a strong and rock-like moral strength. There must have been times when his decisions kept him awake at night, but within that role he developed a moral fortitude, a wisdom, an integrity which was second to none. If only that same moral discipline could run through our contemporary financial systems.

Garth was, simply, a good man, a righteous man, a man of principle who not only exercised that righteousness in his professional life but who also had a heart for the underdog, for the poor and downtrodden. His work in Rotary, of which he was President here in Farnham twice, and his work for the RNLI were outstanding and during his time in Wiltshire he was deeply involved in the work of the County Association of Boy's Clubs.

So, his faith was at the heart of who he was; it was at the heart of his vocation (I choose the word carefully) as a Bank Manager; it was at the heart of his generous care of others...

And, perhaps, above all, it was in his love for Betty, his life's companion and friend for seventy years, and in his pride in their family, the boys and the grandchildren, that we can also get a glimpse of his integrity and quietly deep and humble faith.

You and I are privileged to have known Garth: what a man; what a stalwart and faithful friend... (and I can hear him say to me with eyes downcast, looking at me from under his capacious eyebrows, feeling embarrassed, 'I don't think that's right, do you?. I think you should stop now...')

So, listening to his admonition I shall... but let me say just one more thing....

I return to a gentler verse from one of the Psalms, a verse that's less rocky, less harsh, more pastoral, to try to capture the essence of the man:

He was 'like a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit in due season...' (Psalm 1, 3).

....a strong tree in the centre of a summer lawn surrounded by the walls of a cloister...there Garth is, and as we give thanks with all our hearts to God for his life and for all that he meant and means to us, so we can be assured that with the saints in heaven he is praying for us, loving us towards eternity...

+Christopher Herbert.