

The Late David Leggett. St Thomas-on-The Bourne, January 19th 2023.

In the north-east corner of Italy is a town called Cividale. In that town there is an eighth century Christian stone altar. On one of its sides is carved the story of the Wise Men. They are shown approaching Mary who, with surprise and bewilderment, looks out at us the viewers. Above the heads of the Kings is an angel floating horizontally across the sky.... Who, with one hand, points towards Mary and the Christ child.

Hold that image in your minds for a moment... because here's another...

You may well know the paintings of the Jewish artist, Marc Chagall. He frequently included angels in his compositions. He claimed that his paintings were inspired by his dreams and once said that the act of painting 'appeared to him like a window through which he could fly away toward another world.' Angels in his paintings were symbols of joy and hope and the intertwined connection of eternity with time.

Now you may be wondering why I've begun my sermon in this way. Well. It's because David was to me like an angel. I don't mean a wispy figure in a floaty white gown with golden wings, I mean that he was for me and for many, what the word 'angel' actually means...a messenger. And now, after his death, in my imagination, I picture him like an angel swooping horizontally over Farnham clad not in white but in an immaculate frock coat and pinstripe trousers, white shirt, black tie, with a pair of black leather gloves held in his left hand...smiling...eyes filled with mischievous happiness.

Why was he like an angel? Because to thousands of people throughout his life, when they were most in need and most broken by distress and by grief, he brought hope and promise. He was a reassuring presence; a sign that out of their darkness a light would eventually emerge, and without using any words but by his demeanour and his compassionate professionalism, he was a signal that out of chaos, order would one day return. It is no exaggeration to say that David's life as a Funeral Director was, in very truth, a vocation...a vocation from God.

How did he come to be a funeral director? Let me tell you a little of his life...

David, as you may *not* know, was born in Bournemouth, not in Worthing as he had once believed...and was adopted by Leslie and Dorothy Leggett who were then living in Worthing. He only discovered that he had been adopted late on in his life...and it came as an absolute shock. But, as he said to me, some of the pieces of the jigsaw of his life, about which he had often puzzled, suddenly fell into place. He dealt with that shock with immense courage, honesty, and grace, and because Valerie his dearly loved wife and companion had also been adopted, they discovered that they had more in common than they had ever consciously realised.

Leslie and Dorothy Leggett moved to Farnham in 1947 when Leslie became the Funeral Manager for the firm of H C Patrick. David was sent to Elmsleigh School in The Fairfield run by two spinster sisters, Miss Newton and Miss Joan, and there he suffered an unusual punishment. If a child was naughty they were sent to the attic. So, David, having broken some rule or other, was sent up the stairs. Because he didn't arrive home at the usual time

his mother became worried and anxiously walked down to the school from their home in Monkshanger to find out where he was. The sisters were mortified...they had forgotten that David had been sent to the loft... Imagine that now...he would be offered counselling for the rest of his life... As it was, he just took it in his stride.

As he also took in his stride, the 3rd Farnham Cub Pack that he joined at Daniel Hall just off Long Garden Walk, where a Miss Squirrel was Akela, and Mrs Elsmore was Bagheera. He enjoyed camping holidays, and treks in Farnham Park which always ended with hot cocoa. But I'm sorry to have to tell you, he never mastered the art of tying knots--- though he enjoyed their funny names--- you can imagine the amused look on his face, struggling with bits of limp string....

Life at home was typical for a post-war child: treats were few and far between but because of his work, Leslie Leggett had a car in which he used to take David and his mother to see the grandparents in Littlehampton. David remembered shows on the pier at Brighton with stars such as Ted Ray and Max Bygraves (remember 'You need hands'...?) and on visits around the country. David was also taken to the 1951 Festival of Britain exhibition on London's South Bank and there, on one memorable occasion, he went on the dodgems with his father. Another dodgem crashed into them with such force that David's head hit the pole supplying power at the rear of the dodgem and he was knocked unconscious. The blow was so hard that the school cap he was wearing (there's a giveaway...) went skeetering across the floor. He always felt that his mother was probably more worried about the state of his cap than how he was...

After Elmsleigh, he went to Clark's College in Guildford where a teacher called Mr Drake, as David said, 'lit up RE'. Because by then the family lived in Lower Bourne, David went to St Martin's Church, which he loved and served faithfully all his life, and was the longest serving member of that congregation.

When he left Clark's College he joined his father at H C Patrick. When I once asked him why he had become a Funeral Director, he replied, 'I never thought of anything else'. It was the beginnings of that God-inspired vocation which saw him serve the people of Farnham with immense Christian compassion and distinction for the rest of his life. In 1975 he was awarded a Diploma in Funeral Directing...

Then in 1969 he and Valerie were married...it was to be a partnership which shaped both their lives, and which became the warmly loving home into which Anna and Lynn were born... I can't begin to convey the love which David and Valerie had for each other and for Anna and Lynn. Never heart on sleeve, always understated, marked by loving kindness and a gentle wit, and lots of cake...but also, Anna and Lynn will be aware that David's day-job impinged upon home life more than anyone can know. We owe you, Anna and Lynn, our deepest thanks for all that you did when growing up to support your mother and father. You both have that innate capacity learnt from your parents, to hold confidences, to be people of thoughtfulness and understated grace...and a quiet 'thereness'...simply, thank you.

You will know that when David's father died in 1989, David decided to go it alone. It was a big and risky decision but within almost hours, people were knocking on the door of their

house in School Lane asking him for help and...the rest of the story, when he and the Thorne family set up the new business together, is history.

But I want to add one more thing about David as Funeral Director...and this is from the point-of-view of the clergy. David was an absolute joy to work with. He and I developed such an understanding that we only needed to look at each other to know what each of us was thinking...and that was true also of his relationship with the bearers--- the men, the chaps... he had the highest standards, and everyone knew what they had to do.

I don't know what your image of Funeral Directors might be, but you can imagine that it really is a demanding and at times, emotionally draining job. David's great let-out, his down-time from being the consummate professional, especially if he and John Lampport had been at a funeral some miles away, was, after the funeral to find a café close to a Steam Railway terminus where they could have a piece of cake and a cup of tea and look at the trains and rolling stock...

By the way, two other things about David: did you know he had a real thing about motor-bikes? ...as you will realise when the hearse leaves later, and did you know that he was also a good artist...he did pen and ink sketches of bikes ridden by people such as Barry Sheen...?.

I cannot begin to do justice to his life in this address, but it was his last few years which were an inspiration to many of us. The shock of Valerie's sudden death when he was in hospital having a cancer op...and then making the decision that he wanted no further medical intervention himself when he had developed bowel cancer. Those were difficult years, not least because of his deteriorating eye-sight, but, as you know, he faced all of that and his own death with a calm assurance, understated as always, but filled with an honesty, humility, and a quiet courage which spoke to us all.

It was his deep Christian faith, which was the underlying foundation of his life, the rock on which he stood... he never shouted about his faith, never self-consciously displayed it...but golly, it was the source and ground of all he did, and of who he was. The love and compassion he brought to his work were the love and compassion of Christ.

What a great and lovely man ...for whom no words are adequate, which is why I had to resort at the beginning, to language about angels...

David was in truth, a humble and unselfconscious messenger from God...a human being who through his professional work, through his love for Valerie, and Anna, Kevin, and Charlotte, and Lynn, Andrew, and Poppy, through the gift of his friendship to so many of us here... he was a man who just by being who he was, brought us all closer to an understanding of the word 'grace'. Like the angel at Cividale and like the angels in the paintings of Chagall, David pointed away from himself and courteously towards the Christ-child. That was the very core of his being. And now with huge thanksgiving we commend him with all our love into the tender and compassionate hands of God. David lived on earth with faith in eternity, and now, pray God, he is enjoying it...through the gift and grace of Jesus Christ our Lord, and our most mighty Redeemer.

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.

