

FUNERAL OF PHILIP PATTERSON

Ascension Day, 9 May 2013 at 11.00 am

Knockbreda Parish Church

Address by The Bishop of Down & Dromore, The Rt Revd Harold Miller

Philip Patterson entered into the Lord's closer presence last Sunday night after a short battle with cancer. It has happened so quickly that we can hardly believe he has gone, and in human terms we have lost a friend, a family man, a deeply committed Christian disciple, a pastor and a leader. We are bereft, and this service is a time for all of us who were close to him to realize in God's presence just how very bereft we feel.

If I were to describe Philip Patterson, I would say quite simply that he was a man of honesty, straightforwardness and incredible integrity. He was like a piece of seaside rock with 'integrity' written through and through. He was the same person whether at home, in church, at work or in his relaxation. Now don't get me wrong, not everyone always appreciated that integrity. There were times when his total honesty was hard for us all to live with. What you saw was what you got. If you asked Philip a question you got an answer: not the answer you wanted, but the answer he believed was right. It may or may not have been what you expected, but it was always clear, and the best he could offer. If you agreed, that was fine; if you didn't that was also fine, and he would still stand by me as his bishop even when I disagreed, and did something different!

My first truly memorable meeting with Philip was when he and I were both chosen to serve on a Select Committee of the General Synod in the 1990s on 'Children at Communion'. If I might put it like this, Philip was in the blue corner and I was in the red corner. We profoundly, strongly and even at times pretty fiercely disagreed. But, you know, and this is a measure of the man, when not long after, I became bishop of Down and Dromore, no one could have been more loyal and welcoming than Philip Patterson. I even (and I hate to admit it!) came to the point where I told him that I was *probably* wrong on Children at Communion and he had changed my mind!

Philip was a born archdeacon, and there are not many of those around! Eleanor even admitted to me that the rumour was actually true: He did sometimes take the Constitution to bed with him (how sad is that!), because he wanted to judge every situation for himself. He did not simply accept received wisdom. Mind you he was not a legalist, and one of his great sayings was that the best bits of the constitution were the white parts which said nothing.

But, more deeply than that, and experienced particularly in this parish which he loved and served, Philip was a pastor/teacher. He was loving, gracious, kind and present for all who needed him, and he never understood how so many conflicts could arise in parishes, because his own experience had been of happy ministries. His teaching from the scriptures was greatly valued, and someone said to me just the other day that they had learnt something new from every sermon he preached. Why? Because he soaked himself in the word of God, and read and applied it with freshness. He particularly loved preaching during Holy Week and this year was only the second time in 24 years that he allowed anyone else to take his place. He was simply too weak to do it.

Philip was also greatly attached to his family. They gave him tremendous joy and pleasure, and there was nothing he valued more than having the family gathered around him. How bitter-sweet and wonderful it was that all were there: Eleanor, Neil, Helen, Jill, Michael, and the extended family –especially his four grandchildren: Jessica, James, Harry and eight days-old grandson Toby whom he was able to hold in his arms. They were there with him on the day he died. He loved them watching the rugby together (Philip had been a prop forward – why does that not surprise us!), cooking together (the family had sent him on a Rick Stein course for cooking fish, which he particularly enjoyed); and going up to the wee house in Portstewart for holidays together.

But, to many of us, Philip was, above all else, a close and true friend and brother in the Lord. It's hard for a bishop to lose an archdeacon *in situ*; for a parish to lose their pastor; particularly for a wife and family to lose a husband/father/grandfather/brother but it's harder still when he was a true and greatly-valued friend, and that is certainly the case with Philip.

Just a short time before Philip's death, when he was too weak to read much, Eleanor was continuing their practice of reading the scripture before they went to sleep at night. She had to do all the reading because he was no longer strong enough. The reading that night was Psalm 73. Now Psalm 73, although it starts well:

‘Truly God is loving to Israel: to those who are pure in heart’,

soon goes downhill. It is one of those Psalms which most people do not enjoy reading, perhaps because it is too close to the bone –and indeed we only read parts of it this morning- but then, thankfully, it comes back to a better place at the end. When Eleanor had finished reading it, Philip said, ‘You know, that’s my favourite psalm.’ To which Eleanor replied ‘How could that be your favourite psalm?’ It shows the psalmist as someone who questions, who wonders about human frailty, who is prone to sin, angry with injustice (Philip was a bit of a socialist), annoyed at the apparent triumph of evil in the world, and perhaps even feeling a bit alone in his faithfulness and dissent. It is a psalm which is embarrassing in its honesty. It asks implicitly the question (one which I never heard Philip ask even in the deepest points of weakness) ‘Where is God in all of this?’, a question which may be in the minds of many people in the congregation today. How could that be your favourite Psalm when there are much nicer, softer, more sentimental or praise-filled psalms which most of us might choose? The answer is surely simple: Philip’s utter realism and honesty.

Philip simply could not cope with fluff, fluster and bluster, cloying sentimentality, simplistic naiveté or nonsense. He did not suffer fools gladly, and pretence was utterly abhorred. When I would say, from time to time, ‘Maybe it will change’ or ‘Maybe it won’t turn out like that’, or whatever, he would look out the window and say, ‘Look at that pig flying over there!’ So often did he say it that it gave me great joy to find a battery- powered flying pig in Hamley’s in Heathrow airport which was duly attached to the ceiling above his desk, and switched on by Philip at the appropriate moments!

When Philip began this, his last earthly journey, through the uncertainty of Lent, the pain of the diagnosis on Maundy Thursday, the first Easter weekend when e couldn’t get to church (Easter was his favourite time of the year), he

and Eleanor really appreciated the way in which people gathered around them in prayer. They believed in healing, but Philip also shrewdly said that those in pastoral ministry for a long time knew that some people were healed and some were not. When the diagnosis came, as soon as he had told the family, he wanted the truth to be known. In his last letter to the people of Knockbreda, he himself put it like this:

‘Many of you will be aware of the difficult month I have had with ill health. I have tried to be open and honest with you all; partly because there is no point in being secretive and partly because, if you know the truth, you can pray intelligently for me. I have always dealt in truth trying faithfully to proclaim God’s truth week by week.’

I told him some people were finding it hard to use the word ‘palliative’ in relation to his treatment, and he quickly answered; ‘But that’s what it is. I have always sought to live by the truth and I’m not going to change now!’

But there is another part of that letter I want to read, and it will bring us back to his love for Psalm 73. He says:

‘I have always held firm to a gospel of hope and resurrection – and that is not a hope for this world alone, but for eternity. My days are numbered but that is true of us all. I know that I will soon be made whole in Him. I will not be the one at any disadvantage for I will be with him and that is the goal for which we all press on.’

In other words, the whole of the life of Philip Patterson, disciple of Jesus Christ, was lived in the light of eternity. Eternity was more real for Philip, especially in those weeks before his death, than life itself. O yes, of course he wanted longer to sort things out for Eleanor and to spend time with the family, but he had no fear, better still, an utter security in the fact that Christ was the risen one and he was in Christ for ever. So, all the ups and downs, justices and injustices, successes and failures, hopes and fears, rights and wrongs of this life would come to an end and what he had seen in the ‘sanctuary of God’ (v17) would be fulfilled in completeness before the Psalm was over, and before the story of his life was told:

‘Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire in comparison with you. Though my flesh and my heart fail me (and that was to be literally true), God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever..... But it is good for me to draw near to God: in the Lord God have I made my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.’

Philip was a realist, for whom eternity, the new heaven and the new earth, were more real than this life.

I think, finally, that we should note something else, which must be from the Lord. Philip is being laid to rest today, Thursday 9 May 2013. A special day. Now, there’s one aspect of it the timing wouldn’t have liked. The General Synod is on, and not only is he not there in the front row, but many of the rest of us are not there! Those who loved Philip and who are on the synod, get there quickly, and stay there to the end. That would be good memorial to him. But it’s not the synod I’m thinking about. This is Ascension Day. Philip, you might have missed Easter but you are here in church on Ascension Day: the day of great triumph of the reigning Lord. And because he has ascended to the heavenly places, so it is true for you. He is there waiting, and he receives you into his closer presence, where there is no more sickness, injustice, pain or death.

The Collect of this day (which Philip knew well) puts it like this:

Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ, to have ascended into the heavens; so we in heart and mind may also ascend, and with him continually dwell; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever.
Amen

And a PS! The last words of today’s New Testament Reading (1 Corinthians 15:58) are surely exactly what Philip (if I may speak for him) would want to leave with the Church:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain’.