

The Late Joan Cotterill: a sermon preached by the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.

St Thomas-on-The Bourne, Farnham. Dec 20th 2024

In the last twenty years of the fourteenth century in the Netherlands a new form of Christian life developed. It was a lay religious movement in which the participants did not take the vows of monks and nuns, but they lived in separate male and female communes. They worked in the world for a living but shared their wealth in common, and placed themselves under the authority of their Bishop and the secular leaders of their towns. They went to Mass regularly but held daily prayers and readings in their communes' houses. It was an immensely influential form of Christian living at that time and its influence spread rapidly and deeply. Its founder was a Catholic deacon called Geert Groote. The members of the communes placed emphasis upon individual and communal prayer, and reading the scriptures, and they encouraged each other in the faith by writing brief meditations on which members could ponder. Historians ever since have referred to the movement as the 'Devotio Moderna'.

At which point I can hear you wondering 'what has this to do with Joan?' And my response to your question is 'Everything'...Why? Because a member of this movement was a man called Thomas à Kempis and he wrote a small book for its members called 'The Imitation of Christ'. It was a book which has influenced thousands and thousands of Christians over the centuries ever since, and it influenced Joan throughout her life.

This is its opening sentence: “ *‘He who follows me can never walk in darkness’ our Lord says. Here are words of Christ, words of warning; if we want to see our way truly, never a trace of blindness left in our hearts, it is his life, his character, we must take for our model. Clearly, then, we must make it our chief business to train our thoughts upon the life of Jesus Christ...*”

It was those words which Joan made her own, as you will know and testify.

Now, when I went to see her at her request a few months ago to talk about her funeral, she said very clearly 'I don't want a eulogy'. So I am not going to give one. But Joan loved English literature and taught it along with RE at Weydon in its earliest days. As an English teacher she would have known that a favorite device of medieval writers was to avoid saying anything too flowery or too personal by using a form of speaking called 'Occupatio'. It involves a subtle use of negatives. I am going to use the same technique now. So, I am not going to talk about her early life in Froyle and Farnham; nor am I going to tell you about her life as Head Girl of the Girls Grammar School, nor am I going to mention that when she was Head Girl she persuaded the local bus company to alter all its timetables so that the girls had time to change after games before catching their buses home; nor shall I mention that Joan played Hockey for the County, nor that she went to Keswick Hall Teacher Training College in Norwich, nor shall I talk of her deep love of music and her beautiful singing voice, nor shall I mention that Joan's mother,

Doris Dalrymple founded the Farnham branch of the Arthritis charity ...known then as ARC, but now as 'Versus Arthritis' which Joan always supported; nor shall I speak of Joan and John founding the Waverley Singers, nor shall I mention that she was a great reader of poetry and novels, nor shall I speak of her profound and heart-filled love for her family...for her sons, their wives and the grandchildren... So, there we are...that's 'occupatio' and it was not a Eulogy...

But I cannot forebear to say, (not without peril), that I am going to ignore Joan's wishes, she was a Christian woman who did not wear her Christian beliefs on her sleeve, but through prayer, devotion, disciplined attendance at St Thomas' at the Eucharist, even when suffering from chronic arthritis, and let me emphasise... in her devoted service of others...she was a joyful inspiration to us all...and a great witness to the rich and hallowed depths of a disciplined and faithful Christian life.

She impressed upon me her commitment to what she called 'The Three Fs': faith, family, and friends. Those were at the very heart of her life. Now, there is also no denying that if you follow the Three Fs formula you are not going to be spared deep pain. It is not my place to speak of how Joan lived through some very raw and difficult times: those who knew Joan well, will know that...but it was precisely in the ways in which she lived with and through some of the most demanding challenges any woman can face, that her indomitable faith in Christ and her loving resilience shone through. She truly was a remarkable and inspiring woman.

But she was also convinced that joy was of the essence of the Christian faith. And that joy was revealed in her singing around the house, in her smile, and in her delight in the small and precious things of life...including winning the First Prize of a Hamper at the Christmas Fair the day before she died. But if you wanted to experience what she meant by joy, you had to hear her speak with tender fondness of Brian and Nicky. Living with them was, as she said, a precious privilege.

So, lying within, behind, and through everything from her earliest childhood to her last days, was her awareness of the love and compassion and joy of God in Christ. Not me...not me... look at Christ was her unspoken mantra. In the *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis wrote this: '*the joy of the just is from God and in God, and their gladness is founded on truth*'. That was Joan, that was her life, that was her faith: joy and gladness founded upon the truth revealed in her Lord, Jesus Christ.

We commend our dearly beloved Joan with heartfelt thanksgiving to the mercy of God, knowing through faith, that in Christ she has gone home... gone home to the very source of joy and gladness and truth; gone home to that place where she joins with the saints and angels in creating the music of eternity; gone home, simply, to be with God

For Joan and with Joan, therefore, even in our loss, we too can sing our alleluias...