

An Address for the Funeral Service of

SONIA

Given by the Revd Clare Herbert, St Martin in the Fields, 17 November 2010

“I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”

In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to start by reading a poem called “The Bright Field” by the priest poet RS Thomas. I want to start there because despite being honoured by Sonia’s family to be asked to give this address I knew Sonia, especially in comparison to some of you who are here today, very briefly indeed and in this address must mine the riches of that very short period of my life in which we knew each other, while acknowledging that this was a rich knowing.

The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

R S Thomas

This short poem with its sharp sense of missing and loss and its emphasis on rediscovery and joyful fulfilment helps us glimpse what this funeral service is about. This funeral is for mourning, giving thanks for a life which is now lost to us – the Bright Field was passed over, out of a train window, on our way to work, outside an old house of ours, wherever, and can only be recreated by us and understood in all its rich worth by us in our mind’s eye. Yet there is a brilliant, fresh reconsideration of our own lives in the light of that life which has been lost. This funeral is for that too – there is a lit bush of human values which is eternal, we may dig deep the rich seam of Sonia’s life and hold it in dialogue with our own if we wish today and after today and for ever.

Let us start with the mourning, the lost Bright Field.

When I first saw the headlines on the Newspaper Billboards about what I now know was the incident of Sonia's death I passed on by, determinedly turning my head away. I was tired from a full working Tuesday here and annoyed that the Evening Standard had found yet another titillating story – Murdered Man in women's clothing under train at King's Cross.

It took just the length of the passageway down to Embankment Station for me to break through my resistance, grab the Standard to read, go through the list of the beloved Christian transgender group whom I know, the Sibyls with whom I used to worship in Soho and to consign the nagging doubt to the back of my mind – no, statistically unlikely to be any of them, never thinking once of Sonia whom I had never known as David. It was only later that night after messages left to phone Mary Henry came through that I remembered that passing fear which then gripped me in torrents of tears as Mary, fresh from a visit from the police, gently talked through with me what had happened.

I have been reeling from the shock ever since and encountering other people who are reeling around too. It's vital to start here. Funerals are for the reeling, for deep, churning personal mourning as well as for thanksgiving that we have known such a person. People leave traces of themselves in us - they start to shape our lives. There were many rich narratives in Sonia's life and some of us were important parts of those narratives. I was a sermon or two read in a dark time in Tibet for goodness sake long before we ever met and much to my amazement! She made me rich by giving me that narrative of myself as she will have made you rich in countless other ways. We are faced with reorganising our identities around her loss and that is not an easy task, especially where a death has been sudden, completely unforeseen and violent. We must be gentle with ourselves, gentle with one another, as we enter into that painful reorganisation, we must give ourselves space and time to complete that task which cannot be made light.

One of Sonia's clearest gifts was that of empathy. I am astonished at the sheer volume of people who in the short time that we had Sonia with us here at St Martin's felt that they could unburden themselves to her attentive, non-judgemental listening. Sonia here, David at work, was kind, patient, courteous and respectful of us all, able to use the edges and dark places she had known to get alongside us and offer hope.

What mattered to me enormously was that she did this with humour! I don't know all the groups and institutions with which Sonia worked but I sense that they may all share the propensity to take themselves enormously seriously as does the Church of England. Oh dear, we, I, can be so very dull! I miss the sexy flash of the eyes across the parish hall at me over coffee as I stumble into some dark or serious conversation as if to say Clare, don't panic, there's a gin and tonic at the end of this in my flat, and by the way what do you think of my new dress – Mary thinks it's far too short! I miss her humour dreadfully here and have been so pleased, even in these dark days of shock and grief, to find that twinkling humour in Sonia's beloved children and to hear how much they enjoyed that humour too – still don't understand the jokes, about the belching and the peeing on the floor but then I wouldn't would I! What I do know is that human beings are very very comical and that laughter helps us get ourselves in some sort of sensible perspective!

The last gift which I want to mention in the Bright Field that was Sonia was a heady mix of courage and sheer determination which I want to call faithfulness – faithfulness to her self, faithfulness to her children, faithfulness to vulnerable people needing her, faithfulness to the task at hand. It takes enormous courage to allow different parts of the narratives of our lives to be told, without shame – there is a blessed heavenly freedom to it but to arrive at that takes dogged

determination and no few small leaps in the dark of not knowing. It takes courage to express the complexity of our gender and sexual identity in a rather repressed church and world but in the telling of our honest narratives other lives are touched and healed. Not that faithfulness is only about honesty, important ingredient though that is. It's also about caring in minute and time consuming detail and Sonia was so good at that, both as David in painstaking cases and among us as a steadfast friend. Hand on back, texting messages, giving the encouraging word – and here coming regularly, not withholding herself, joining groups, taking the collection. It looks as though that time consuming careful kindness eventually led to Sonia's own death, there is a cost to such brave self giving – and here we must remember Nina too and how in the days to come Sonia will want us to care for her as she would have and did.

I must end now. This funeral will end soon. And Sonia's earthly life with us ends in some ways today. But there is a bright field which remains. As I sift through my memories of her and all the stories which you have told me that lit bush at which it feels worth standing for a while is this – Sonia's love for us and Sonia herself will be recreated in us to the extent that we, each of us here, allow ourselves time to get alongside people – learn ourselves to have so little regard for their outward appearance of beauty and age, status and class, gender and race and sexual orientation, wealth and education that we permit the real, aching, wonderful, extraordinary narratives of their lives to be opened to us, so that together we may make a church and make a world more able to contain those real narratives and lives.

Sonia did not take from us but gave us back our own selves to respect and treasure – let us strive in her memory to make a world in which that treasuring and respect become more possible.

The poem.

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