

Tribute to Gervase Markham at his Thanksgiving Service

by Freddy Markham

Morland Church 12th January 2008

My father did not believe in Tributes. Still less Eulogies - at funerals especially. His attitude was rather like Woody Allen's about death: "It's not that I'm afraid of dying. It's just that I don't want to be there when it happens". That is why we buried him first with the few and simple words of the prayer book, just like he used to bury soldiers in the corners of fields during battles. There were no speeches or sermons then. The name of the dead man was not even mentioned. All that mattered was that a soul had gone to meet his Maker and Redeemer. It was for God to be his judge, not us. We are all equal in the sight of God, and never more so than at death. "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out".

But today we are not satisfied with this stern teaching. We want to talk about all that a person has left behind. And my father left behind a very great deal. We want to know about his life, to celebrate his achievements, and to give thanks for his memory. My father accepted this, but he left any thanksgiving service up to us, and, as I said, just did not want to be there when it happened.

I am not going to go through all the events of his 97 years, even if there was time to do it. If you want to know the facts, there have been full obituaries in the Times and in our local Herald. I would rather consider what we can learn from his example. But first it is interesting to recall his early life nearly a century ago. He was born in 1910 in Grimsby Vicarage, the son of Algernon Markham, the vicar, and his wife Winifred Barne of Sotterley, Suffolk. He had one older and three younger sisters, two of whom survive him. He was one of the last people you will meet who could remember the First World War. He could remember knitting socks for his mother's brother, Uncle Seymour, to send to him serving in France with the Royal Flying Corps. And then he could remember the shock of seeing his mother cry when Seymour was killed. He could remember the funeral processions along Bargate, the road in front of the vicarage, with the horse drawn coffin draped with the Union Jack escorted by sailors. In after life when he wanted to suppress laughter, he remembered those coffins.

In January 1920, aged 9, he was sent to boarding school at Bramcote in Scarborough, and from there he passed well into Winchester, and after that - without taking an exam, o happy days - he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, as his father had done, to read first classics and then English. He followed this with a two year teaching post in Jerusalem in 1933/34 where he gained a lifelong sympathy for Christian Arabs, the original Christians, now a small minority within a beleaguered minority, struggling to keep open churches in the birthplace of Christianity. Half the retiring collection today is to help Christians in the Holy Land.

By now sure of his vocation as a priest, he returned to England to study for ordination at Westcott House, Cambridge, and in 1936 at the age of 25 was made a deacon by the famous bishop of Durham, Hensley Henson. His first parish was at Bishopwearmouth, outside Sunderland, an industrial parish in the grip of the Depression. It was his first contact with real poverty, and one wonders now what impression this public school man must have made on his parishioners. He used to wear a raincoat when out visiting, as he was worried about catching lice. After three

years came promotion to be Domestic Chaplain to the Bishop of Durham who lived in state at Auckland Castle. He worried about leaving “the front line” but this was clearly a step up even if meant dressing for dinner every night and being waited on by a butler and footman.

Thus far his life had been pretty conventional, and he might well have risen up the ecclesiastical ladder. But the war was to change all that. Realising he could not spend the war in the castle, he volunteered for the army. The story was that the bishop and his chaplain were driven to the recruiting office by the chauffeur to offer their services. The chaplain and the chauffeur were accepted, but the bishop was politely declined. He eventually sailed for the Middle East via the Cape of Good Hope in 1941, but it was not until October 1942 when serving with an artillery regiment that he saw real action at the battle of Alamein. He took part in the advance all along North Africa to Tunisia but on the eve of a triumphal entry into Tunis, the regiment was sent back all the way it had come to Alexandria to prepare for the invasion of Europe. It was not known if Sicily or Greece was to be invaded so my father bought both Italian and Greek phrasebooks. Once the ship sailed it was revealed that Sicily was the destination, and by the time they landed my father was the regimental interpreter. There was some very fierce fighting in Sicily, particularly at a place called Primasole Bridge, where a German Panzer Division had been flown to have a holiday from the rigours of the Eastern Front. It was a shock to both sides to discover each other. Eventually the far side of Sicily was reached and the Italian mainland could be seen across the water, but 50 Div was recalled to prepare for the invasion of France. My father arrived back at Liverpool on 7th November 1943, but it was only completing his campaign diary that night that he remembered that it was his 33rd birthday.

The next phase of the war was even more intense. Arriving in Normandy a month after D Day, he was immediately posted to the 8th Bn Durham Light Infantry who had lost two chaplains in two days. His first job was to bury his predecessor who had been killed returning from burying his predecessor. He had been run over by a tank on his motorcycle. My father handed in his motorcycle immediately, and took to a jeep. Life was now too hectic to have time to write a diary. Death could come at any moment, and often did. He was very lucky on one occasion when a shell exploded in front of him. A piece of shrapnel scoured his cheek, tore a hole in his haversack, and killed the man behind him. During fighting, his job was in the regimental aid post where casualties were first brought. If they were alive they were sent back to the casualty clearing station, but if they were dead, they were handed to him for burial. The regiment was continually in action, pushing back the Germans field by field so nearly every day in July and August 1944 he was burying his comrades as well as many Germans. And he also wrote a personal letter to each man's next of kin, always hoping it would arrive before the dreaded telegram. He didn't know the next of kin, and usually didn't know the dead man but he had to write a comforting letter to a stranger. It was here that he first began to write the letters for which so many of us remember him. There is no doubt that my father was a supreme letter writer. He would write many letters of appreciation. “If you have something critical to say, say it and it can be forgotten later, but if you have something good to say, write it, and it can be kept for ever”. But even more importantly he wrote excellent letters of sympathy and condolence which were always treasured. Many of us here today will have kept

one or more of his letters, always written personally by hand in pen and ink. He learnt this craft in the war.

I would like to mention just two of the many thousands of letters he wrote. In 2004 a lady died in Darwen, Lancashire, who wanted a letter to be buried with her. It had been written to her during the war when her son, Jack Banks, had been killed. He had lied about his age, joined the army at 16, and been killed in Normandy serving with the DLI. His mother didn't even know he was in France. The story of the underage war hero created a stir in Darwen and the DLI were contacted. The family were amazed to learn that the chaplain who had written the letter was still alive 60 years later. At a special ceremony in the town, my father read again the letter he had written so long before. It was to a stranger about a stranger, but it had meant so much to Jack's mother that she wanted to take it to her grave.

This episode brought home to my father how much his letters could mean, and in the last few years of his life he made a rule to write a letter of appreciation, support or sympathy every day. He kept this up right to the end. On the last day of his life, he was determined to write a letter to the family of his next door neighbour, Gladys Horne, who had died on Christmas Day four days earlier. He knew he was dying himself, but he wanted to tell them how much he thought of her and of them. He got dressed, went to his study, sat at his desk and wrote the letter, and his carer, Sally, delivered it next door. No doubt that letter too will be treasured by the Horne family.

Letter writing was an example of a principle which helped make his life such a long one. He always said that if there is something you can no longer do, there is always something else which you can start doing, and which you can gain just as much pleasure from. If you can no longer play football, you can play cricket, and then perhaps golf, and then perhaps croquet. My father played his best croquet when he was 95, frequently beating John Parker, the gardener, in their Friday evening game. He was able to keep gardening into old age. He started rebuilding all the stone walls and steps after he retired aged 74, and built many new ones. Over 20 years he rebuilt or built virtually the whole garden. If you would like to look round the garden afterwards, please do so, and think how nearly everything you see has been constructed by him. He loved dry stone walling because it satisfied the mind, the body and the spirit. There was a permanent achievement to show for it afterwards - and it cost nothing.

My father always had a project. His talent was conceiving an idea, working it up into a plan, and then making it happen. In his lifetime he had many projects, large and small, so there was always something to be done and to look forward to - an important reason why he lived so long. Major projects included the building in Burnley of the first Church of England primary school following the Butler Education Act of 1944, the building of St Mark's church in Grimsby, and the building of a brand new church school here in Morland. The official plan was to close the three local church schools and another small village school, and to build a new county school at Newby. But using his Burnley experience my father was determined that a new church school was possible. No one believed that the money could be found. It was difficult and controversial to close three single teacher village schools to make one larger school. He favoured the single larger school on educational grounds while at the same time being chairman of the governors of the small village schools that were due to be

closed. In the end a new church school was built in Morland. It flourishes today, and we have him to thank for it.

Other projects include the Morland Pageant in 1994 and the Eden Millennium Festival in 2000 which included the dedication of the Eden Millennium Monument, a 50 ton block of Shap granite erected near the 4,000 year old Mayburgh Henge outside Penrith, and designed to be a permanent witness to 2,000 years of Christianity. Entirely conceived by him, it is also a permanent memorial to his extraordinary vision.

But the main project of his life was the creation of the Morland Choir Camp. He had the idea back in 1971 and it has grown in popularity, professionalism and national stature for 37 years, and it was for this that he was awarded the MBE in 2000. With the Millennium Festival, it made that year his Annus Mirabilis. Not many people have the best year of their lives when they are 90. The Choir Camp gave him more pleasure than virtually anything else. He called it his extended family, and loved all its members like a family. The boys and girls understood that, and kept coming back until many were included on the staff. He encouraged them to write to him, and he always wrote personally back to them. You can see how much they loved and respected him as we have this wonderful choir of over 100 who have come from all over the country to be here today. Many thanks to you all for the pleasure you gave him.

There are many other aspects of my father's life which there is simply not time to mention. You will all have your own memories of him. He touched many lives.

I ought to say that he was a devoted parish priest who visited every family in this parish and knew them all whether they came to church or not. He kept a card index to record what everyone had done and who they were related to. He recruited just about every child in the parish into a church choir. Some he trained as servers who assisted him in services. Three of the most regular ones became county councillors in later life, and all three of them helped pull his coffin to his grave today. Everyone he touched was a better person as a result of his influence. In the words of the tablet he put up to his own father in Grimsby church, he was "a wise master builder of living stones".

I should mention that he was lucky to marry Barbara Banks, a teacher and WRNS officer, whom he met in Egypt during the war. They spent 47 years of happy married life together. She had three sisters, two of them happily here today. I should not forget that he had three children and ten grandchildren.

But the main point is, what can we learn from Gervase's joyful life? I do not mean adopting his words of wisdom such as, "the effort of proving yourself right is seldom worthwhile". I mean lessons more substantial than that. I suggest a few might be:

- 1 Accept the world as it is. Do not worry about what happens. "Things that happen do not matter. It is only our response to them that matters".

- 2 Find interest and enjoyment in all around you. The world is full of interest to the enquiring mind.

3 If you are no longer able to do some activity, there is always a new one which you can enjoy just as much. Always have something to look forward to.

4 Appreciate the best in people, and tell them so in writing. You will bring out the best in them.

Gervase rhymes with Service, and Gervase served others all his life. This does not mean he just did what others told him to do. Far from it. He was a leader, but everything he did was for others and not for himself. This selflessness was the reason for his joyful life.

It may be a cliché because it is true, but JOY stands for Jesus, Others, Yourself in that order. My father obeyed the two greatest commandments. He loved God and loved his neighbour, and thereby discovered true JOY.

May we who follow be inspired by his example, and discover true JOY in our own lives.