

GRACE ABOUNDING

As he was her pastor for the years that she and David lived in our parish, we invited Roger to contribute this piece remembering Grace Sheppard – Ed.

Every so often I would receive what I used to call a “summons”. It was never direct (for that was the point), rather it was phrased along the lines of “If you are passing, call in sometime”. It was not long before I realised that this was indeed a summons, gently and graciously phrased, and there was something the speaker wanted to talk to me about, sooner rather than later.....

Obedient to this summons, I would call at the house on Melloncroft Drive and sit in the sun-room at the back of the house, where her beloved David had passed to his Lord, and talk with Lady Sheppard.

Grace was a lady, unfailingly courteous, elegant and ordered, and she was gracious also – with the grace of God, as so many of us discovered, both in West Kirby and beyond.

To visit Grace was always instructive, illuminating and encouraging. Whether she wished to talk about her latest book (for she wrote well and profoundly, but the creative process was not always easy, and she needed to ‘bounce’ ideas around), or whether in more personal or pastoral terms, I felt that there was a two-way process in the conversation. I received as much as I ever gave, if not more. In those meetings, whether named or not, the Lord and his grace were present.

Grace talked a great deal about “friendship”. She believed that in a culture where the word could be used so shallowly (eg on social networking sites), it needed to be reclaimed.

Friendship, especially in the Christian spiritual tradition, can mean a loving awareness of and attentiveness to the other person, and Grace manifested this in so many ways. We found in her a warmth, a wisdom and a deep perceptiveness, sometimes akin to a Spirit-given “word of knowledge”. She had the ability and the gift to go the heart of what made a person, and to do so with an accepting and unconditional love that was part of her foundational experience of God.

Grace had the gift of spiritual friendship and the gift of the encourager. To some she was clearly a mentor, to others a guide, but also as a companion, one who travelled with rather than dictated from another emotional and spiritual place. That was true also in her relationship with David. They were in love throughout their married life (we could so clearly see that) but they were also friends, and, we might say, they walked together on “Hope Street” Not all intimate relationships have, or retain, that quality.

Grace’s friendship gradually and graciously learned to receive as well as give, not least from her beloved “angels” in David’s and then her last illness.. Not for nothing was one of her favourite hymns (sung at her funeral service) “Brother, sister, let me serve you”, with the line about being “companions on the road”, and the ever

challenging “Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too”. Grace knew what that aspiration meant and what an inner transformation it entails for us.

Grace always struck me as someone who was very “together”, and very “integrated” and very “whole”. This, we know, was not something easily gained, but a result of her experiences of illness and anxiety and fear about which she wrote so movingly and so unassumingly in her first book *An Aspect of Fear*. This brave and honest account of her struggle with agoraphobia, has been a source of healing for so many and a means of real grace. God’s way, though he manifestly does *not* send these experiences, can be to turn them to good and to healing, and these was surely the case for our sister Grace. She would, however, have been the first to say that she was still a work in progress.

In her last illness we saw that too. Many have commented on her courage, the sheer and heightened wonder she found in the world around, the determination to live each moment as fully as possible and to expect it to be a moment of presence. The 18th century spiritual writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade talks of “the Sacrament of the Present Moment” and for Grace that phrase was deeply significant, not least, I think, in these last months. Her “E-bulletins” to family and friends were remarkable documents, chronicling not only her treatment and her feelings (in a quite unassuming way) but also describing her garden and her home, delighting in so much detail, and so many moments. Her last e-mail, just a few days before she died included a wonderful watercolour of the trees outside her Hospice room, full of yellows and reds and golds. It was a picture of deep joy. Here was someone who delighted in the created world, all the more so as its boundaries for her became smaller and tighter.

In her last hours Grace spoke of “hovering between two worlds”. She had done her letting go and there was, it seems, almost an Advent expectation of what would be. But there is a sense in which her delight in this world and its wonders was not cut short in death but rather led her into the greater richness and greater marvels of God’s presence. As Paul writes to the Corinthian Church, “*now I know in part but then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known*” (1 Cor.13:12) She was indeed living with dying.

In West Kirby and beyond we have been privileged to know and walk with Grace and allow her to walk with us. She has been a companion with whom we broke bread sacramentally and socially, and wise friend. We do grieve and we will miss her (and we pray with and for Jenny and the family), but we know she with David is safe in Christ, our first friend and true friend.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Roger Clarke December 2010