

Address by the Very Revd JO Mann, Dean of Belfast, at the Funeral Eucharist for Dr Donald Davison in St John's Malone on Wed 7 Aug 2013.

Gathering as we are in such numbers at this service, on the death of Donald Davison last week, demonstrates with what affection Donald is held; and I know that others wished to be here today, but have been unable, including Bishop Poyntz, who for years, both as Diocesan Bishop and later in retirement worshipped in this Church – Donald and he were great friends. Donald died on the eve of his and Rosemary's golden wedding anniversary celebration. It was a moment of profound sadness. We all knew that he wasn't well, and was having his own extraordinary courage and uncomplaining attitude to life's vicissitudes, supported by his closest family and friends. He spoke in his positive way of one of the effects of his illness being that he had space and time to be with people in an unhurried way, for long and fruitful talks. Both St Paul, and Jesus himself, encapsulated the unhurried fellowship of the presence of love, as a reflection of something of a higher order of life, that ultimately lies at the point at which a human soul relates to Christ, and thereby is touched by the Divine life, as we partake of most obviously in the Eucharist. When Jesus spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper, amongst many other things he related a picture of the spaciousness of the Father's house. Now, we all possess a mind's eye and how we see this actually, scarcely matters; what does matter is how we understand relationship and new life in our vision of Christ, as the one who unites us in his death and thus draws us to himself, whilst holding us in the spacious grace of resurrection. I use those words deliberately: spaciousness, grace and resurrection. As forgiven sons and daughters, our Lord holds before us a dwelling place that is formed around these gifts, that he was gradually revealing to his disciples in the Upper Room. Let us look a little into how Donald reflected upon such mysteries, by ourselves considering how his life assumed so much that is unseen and unheard into our senses and thus leading us to experience.

I want to use a little analogy that is based upon one of Donald's instructions to choirs concerning phrasing, specifically on the intimation of a break, in say a line of an anthem, that he doesn't want to hear as a break, but he wants to know is there; whereby we subtly colour or affect a situation by a mere suggestion of its presence, like a pause in a line of music that in fact isn't a pause, let alone a rest or an intake of breath; it is the merest hint of a space – a blink of an eye that actually didn't happen, but it was enough for people to believe it had. With such subtlety, Donald Davison will live with many of us. He had a way of musically expressing the numinous in the liturgical and theological that was verbally almost inexpressible. Some of us would say that that is the function of music in worship, to open the heart and mind, to expose us – make us vulnerable, sensitive to the words we read and sing, to sacramental realities, to theological concepts; to colour and space and silence, ultimately to the touch of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Silence, even today in this Funeral Service, provides the space that opens the mind to what we are doing today. Primarily we are reminding ourselves of the Good News. Everything that Donald did was solidly based upon a firm faith in Christ, as surely as his amazing musical ability was based on an incredibly dedicated honing of technique, of research and practice and on that old-fashioned virtue "solid hard work". So his theological astuteness – and arguably he was as good a theologian as he was musician and mathematician – was always being refined; he challenged himself and when he questioned others, it was only after considerable acute analysis. I mention all of these things for the purpose not just of painting a picture of Donald, but to illustrate as far as I feel I can, just how his understanding of the truth that lies in Christ Jesus affected his consistently measured (and that is a word I like in relation to Donald) expression of the liturgy through the eyes and ears of an expert musician. So we take the truth of salvation history and expose it in word and music to the flow of Advent or Holy Week, and what do we have but an extraordinary shaft of light applied, to help all who experience it, to visualise and internalise the message of God's saving love, personified in Christ, shed on Calvary and confirmed on Easter Day. We rest here in confidence today because of our hope in the death and resurrection of our Lord and our assurance that Donald's hope lay there too. But mindfully holding this axiom, let us etch his career upon it.

Donald was born in 1937, and was baptised in Cooke Centenary Presbyterian Church; he lived in Dungannon during the war years, then the family returned to Belfast and joined Ravenhill Presbyterian Church and he attended Rosetta Primary School, where already his musical ability and general academic prowess was showing itself; progressing to INST, as had his father before him, his exceptional school career concluded with him becoming Head Boy in 1954. This multi-talented young man had already won a composition prize, formed a madrigal group and was assisting with the organ at Rosemary Presbyterian Church. He gained his ARCO at the age of 18 and his FRCO a year later. The breadth of his abilities spanned several disciplines: First Class Honours B.Sc. in Physics from Queen's and subsequently M.Sc.; Ph.D in Theoretical Chemistry from Cambridge in 1963, appointed lecturer in Applied Maths at Queen's at much the same time.

For most of us here, Donald's career in Mathematics, is rather shaded by his life in music, but let us not lose sight of it as we delve a little further into his contribution to the life and witness of the Church of Ireland; for he married into it – thank you Rosemary! Actually, organist-wise Donald went back and forth: assistant organist in St Thomas for seven years where Donald and Rosemary met as fellow bell-ringers; organist of Ravenhill Presbyterian Church in 1962 and then after their marriage in Upper Falls Parish Church where Rosemary's father was Rector, came the first of the two major Choirmaster/Organist appointments that Donald was to hold, that at St Jude's from 1964 to 1977. It was during this time that Heather became his assistant and a great friend of the family; it was an excellent partnership, Heather gaining much from Donald and he from her. Over many years she has supported Donald's work with Parish Choirs as well as playing herself as Donald conducted or on rare occasions, took a Sunday off! By 1977, and after over twelve years in St Jude's, Ruth, Andrew and Debbie having all been born, and were all at school themselves, in February of that year, Donald began the 36 years that he was to spend as Choirmaster/Organist of this Parish Church. Those years saw many accolades and responsibilities coming Donald's way, some of which ended when he retired from Queen's in 2002, and some I will mention in a minute, but let us not forget Rosemary and Ruth and Andrew and Debbie, because they were his life and joy, and we offer them deep sympathy and our prayers today. As a proud and loving father and grandfather, before and above the demands that he placed upon himself, and the responsibilities that he accepted in the sphere of music, his family were first. Ruth and her husband William settled near Larne so it was a pleasure for Donald and Rosemary to have them close and to see Rebekah and Lydia achieve so much, as they have grown into young women, and it was also a great joy (and excuse to travel to Yorkshire) to visit Andrew with his wife Mieke and their young family, Alan, Stephen and Nellie, whilst visits to Debbie also often included the added delight of some special musical event in which she was involved – in fact she was always a star to Donald. But now for a few of the accolades of his own:

For many years Donald was Queen's University Organist and was Belfast City Organist for twenty-three years, which involved a weekly lunchtime recital in the Ulster Hall, squeezed between lectures; he was a scientific adviser to the Home Office, a regional advisor on civil defence to the Northern Ireland Office; founder of the Ulster Church Music Centre which was part of the outcome of his membership of the Joint Committee for Church Music in Ireland; he held the key role of Musical Editor of the Irish Church Hymnal 2000 and he Co-authored (with Bishop Edward Darling) the "Companion to the Church Hymnal" in 2005. He was awarded Honorary Associate of the Royal School of Church Music in 2006 and shortly afterwards awarded an MBE for services to Music in Northern Ireland and just two months ago was presented with Honorary Life Membership of USOC – the Ulster Society of Organists and Choirmasters. The Bishop of Down and Dromore, as Chairman, has paid tribute to Donald's work on the Liturgical Advisory Committee and on the Hymnal Supplement Group and for the whole Church of Ireland these will be his most significant legacy, but his musical settings of the Holy Communion Service Order 2 and his carefully annotated and pointed arrangements for the chanting of the Psalms according to the Book of Common Prayer 2004 are well worthy of publication and wide use in the Parish Churches of Ireland. Let us hope that one day this may be realised.

Donald was fundamentally a Parish Choirmaster and Organist. He saw with absolute clarity and conviction that the life of the Church of Ireland is realised in the local context, using the resources available, and that, skilfully directed, a very good standard of choral music is possible with encouragement, commitment and a lot of effort. Successive rectors of Malone have benefited from his expertise and wonderful organ playing. It was always Bach in Lent and Advent; the voluntary that ended another beautifully ordered musical offering to God – whether Sung Eucharist or Choral Evensong – the latter often sung amidst empty pews but in chorus with the angels and archangels. For a big man, Donald was surprisingly light-footed, and capable of an energetic stillness that reflected the fact that his grey cells were aligning themselves with those of Tallis or Palestrina. Grey matter that another day could unlock the complexities of a mathematical problem or re-order a line of prose. In recent years, his favourite pastime was a daily attempt to beat the time limit for *The Times* killer sudoku; great joy if he succeeded and was well under, depression if too much over.

Of course, we all knew that he couldn't find his place in the hymn book without Heather, and their repartee was part of every Choir practice, and a little activity near the organ during the service usually indicated that Donald was being put right in time for the next thing to be sung, but he seemed to play so sensitively and appropriately for every occasion, even if part of the organ wasn't working properly, which happened from time to time. Before the recent renovation of the organ the pigskin of the bellows was badly split and held together with parcel or duck tape. By the end of each service the tape had generally come loose and the swish of the escaping air was like the sound of a waterfall in the background, but still the music was there as Donald pressed on. His improvisations were always amazing and when asked as to the composer of the piece he had just played, he always modestly replied: "Solenka" – his musical *non de plume*.

The St John's organ, which has been enlarged and reordered to Donald's specification, will now be inherited by someone else, but I am delighted that his improvements have been funded by successive Select Vestries, and as a physical addition to this beautiful church with its gorgeous stained glass and other fine features, it will be symbolic of a devotional legacy that Donald leaves to this Parish and to all who worship here. Yet, important though that may be, what is physical such as the organ in this Church, is always reflective of what is passing, but the intangible, the lovely, the example of striving with the matters of the Spirit, the things of inner worth, the holding fast to truth and friendship, loyalty and the conviction that Christ is all and in all and with all; these things are more than memories, they affect us at a point that only fellow men and women of faith truly understand, and these things that Donald shared so generously, especially with his family, but in fact with us all, are what will live with us in the days and years to come, not just when we sing something he has composed or read words that he has written, but in the ordinary round of life when in the quiet we recall a man of not only extraordinary gifts but with the determination and discipline, with the strength of personality and the conviction to use them to the uttermost. We are here out of admiration and love, many others, knowingly or unknowing, will reap where he has sown, and I hope and pray in our time, we and they may do a little planting and tending of our own. Donald would love to see, in his own spirit of generosity and humility, the continual development of the musical and liturgical life of the Church of Ireland that he always saw as work in progress, a work of love in every sense and a joy to our common life and prayer.