

Funeral sermon

This is an attempt to write up from my notes what I said at Audrey's funeral. All such attempts are bound to be inaccurate, but, particularly for those who could not be present, better something than nothing.

We meet today to commend Audrey to God. Let us be clear. No words of mine can fool God. We are not here to change his mind. It cannot be done. But we are to remember Audrey, as we commit and commend her to God's care, as a person and not as a dead body. All of you knew Audrey in some ways; but I am sure many of you want to know more.

Firstly (in order of time) as an academic. She was an Oxford classicist, as I was (that is how we met), achieving a first class in Honour Moderations and a second in Finals (after three long oral examinations for a first running over two days). She went on to obtain a Diploma in Classical Archeology with distinction, and then a Doctor of Philosophy for a thesis on Sikyon, a classical Greek city some twenty miles west of Corinth. She was able to rework the thesis as a book, and also contributed to "Who was who in the Greek World". But also she appeared on University Challenge, spoke at the Oxford Union and sang in the Oxford Bach Choir (on one occasion, we had the experience of singing Haydn's Creation conducted by Edward Heath with Harold Wilson in the audience!) Unfortunately, she completed her thesis just as the academic job market had one of its periodic downturns, but for many years she worked for the British Academy on its lexicon of ancient Greek personal names. This included learning how to update the Oxford computer through the Cambridge computer using "Janet", an early form of the Internet.

Next, as an embroiderer (among other crafts). I think she learnt the basic skills at school. She resumed embroidery as a hobby while we were still at Oxford, and joined the Oxford branch of the Guild. This continued when we moved to Cambridge. Eventually she was able to devote herself full time to City and Guilds Parts 1 and 2, and was taken so seriously that her tutor, the late Pauline Verrinder, gave her a place in Fen Edge Textiles. So she continued exhibiting, and, after Pauline retired, also studied for a time with Gina Ferrari, until her cataracts made this impossible. After the successful cataract operations, she resumed study under Ricki Outis, and also joined Stitched Together when the Guild abandoned its branch structure. Not that embroidery was her only skill. I have mentioned choral singing; she was also, through adult education, a sculptor, mainly in ceramics but also in other media, even stone carving. And an able knitter.

It is meaningless to assess the quality of our marriage. Let it be said that we were married for over fifty years, and in that time we did experience in practice what our vows had been "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, till death us do part."

She had to endure considerable sickness. The first problem was high blood pressure; I have mentioned the cataracts; her right knee never fully recovered after a fall, even with a joint replacement; and arthritis was an increasing problem. There was also diabetes, and multiple medications which brought further problems. Dupuytren's contracture had been diagnosed and would in time have made embroidery very difficult. All these physical problems she endured as best could be. It is also important to remember that the mental distress caused by Brexit never left her.

And then suddenly it was all over. Perhaps she was spared further decline; who can say? As a Christian minister, all I can say is that the proper end of a marriage is bereavement. How can it be otherwise? That does not make it any the happier an ending, even when the proper steps have been taken to prepare for it. But there is this comfort, that our vows, both hers and mine, are handed back to God, before whom they were made, not perfected but still kept, however imperfectly, for over fifty years.