

**Solemn Requiem for Bishop Geoffrey Rowell  
Chichester Cathedral, 5 July 2017**

**Sermon by the Rt Revd Dr Rowan Williams,  
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Sometime in 1967 or 1968 a friend was discussing with Austin Farrer some of the new fashions in theology – notably, the idea that perhaps God was dead. Farrer, theological hero for Geoffrey as for many here today, replied, ‘The test is: do they believe in a future life? If people don’t believe in a future life, I can’t believe they believe in God.’ To some people’s ears, that comment might grate. Surely that would be back to the days of ‘pie in the sky’ fantasies, in which people were so interested in what happened after death that they gave themselves an alibi for the meantime? But hear those words again in the context of the Gospel we have just listened to: ‘I am the resurrection, and the life’, says Jesus. We believe in a future life because we believe in that kind of God. We believe that, if God is God, we shall not fall into nothingness, and that, if Jesus is God, it is his hands that will hold us in and through the greatest loss we can imagine. To believe in God is to believe in God’s faithfulness, and to believe in God’s faithfulness is to believe in the resurrection.

Geoffrey certainly knew a great deal about the history of belief in the afterlife. His book *Hell and the Victorians* remains a classic of its kind – a book which not only covers shifts in intellectual fortunes, but also reflects on the impact on wider human culture of the loss of belief in regard to life everlasting. What he describes in that book is the loss and confusion in our whole self-understanding that comes with changes in patterns of belief in the resurrection. When such belief becomes faint and wavering, we lose the deep hinterland which enables us to make sense of what is often a confused and confusing world, not least a confused and confusing theological world. But Geoffrey’s richly-informed theological hinterland kept this always in view. And that is what makes sense of his controlled, but never quite invisible, impatience with not only the substance but also the style of a lot of modern theological discussion.

Geoffrey was a friend for some 45 years – for part of that time, as a fellow member of the House of Bishops of the Church of England. Some of the conversations which I knew were going to be most fertile and challenging were those in the margins of the House of Bishops with the Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe. One such conversation, which I remember vividly, followed on a debate in the House, which might have been about some contemporary controversial issue (such debates do happen from time to time). I remember Geoffrey’s impatience – controlled, but visible: ‘We don’t know’, he said, ‘these days how to talk about certain subjects in public without muddle and vulgarity.’ He wasn’t reflecting embarrassment or prudery, but simply a sense that, in so much of our theological discussion of sensitive matters in ethics and personal life, we didn’t really know the key to sing in. Geoffrey, to pursue the metaphor, had natural pitch. Geoffrey’s sense of the ‘musical’ coherence of Christian doctrine and spirituality was one of the things that made him so powerful and credible as, not exactly an advocate, but simply a witness to the essentials of Catholic Christianity. Generations of students – not least, generations of ordinands – learned this from him: a sense of the expansiveness, and the exhilaration of Christian orthodoxy. Not for nothing was he an admirer of Austin Farrer.

But it was also that deep attunement to the melody of orthodox, catholic Christianity that meant that he had no worries about learning from and befriending people who came from radically different worlds, not only within the Church but also beyond it. I owe to him more than one introduction to unlikely people from unlikely backgrounds who would enrich and illuminate and make life more nourishing. I think of one among many, the late Murray Cox, senior consultant psychiatrist at Broadmoor for twenty-six years – not, you might have thought, a natural friend for a fellow of Keble College. That's only one perspective on the rare network of friendships, sustained loyally over so many years, which defined Geoffrey as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a priest of the catholic Church.

That deep hinterland explains too why this in many ways ultra-English figure was so adventurous a traveller – student groups being taken to Bhutan, Azerbaijan, as well as more familiar destinations, the historic Christian lands of the Middle East. Geoffrey's future destiny cast its shadow before it in those days at Keble, when so many shared the exuberance of his keenness to travel and to learn in travelling. It's that that makes it very clear that he and the Diocese in Europe were made for each other.

Another regular theme at meetings of the House of Bishops was Geoffrey's eagerness to talk about the Diocese in Europe – to talk about its growth, its health, and its diversity. For him, the growth of that diocese was testament to the capacity of the Anglican identity to go on attracting and exciting. In addition to all that was done, day by day and week by week, in pastoral work in the Diocese, there's hardly any need to underline the immense contribution Geoffrey made to the Church of England's ecumenical consciousness. For many years he managed, almost single-handedly, the complex business of relating to the Oriental Orthodox churches. He reminded us in the Church of England – and indeed in this country – bravely, clearly and consistently of the needs and pressures faced by our brothers and sisters in those oldest Christian communities on the face of the earth, now confronting unimaginable insecurity and suffering. He was close, throughout his life, to the Byzantine Orthodox churches, loved and respected throughout that world. He won the same trust and respect from his Roman Catholic colleagues in Continental Europe, but also from Protestant partners in ecumenical ventures and discussions across the Continent.

His ministry in Europe was, in every sense and at the deepest level, a catholic ministry – a ministry testifying to what the Church of England was capable of, not only in its engagement with other historic churches but also in what, to many people, could sometimes be a surprising flexibility in the internal life of the Diocese, a flexibility expressed in pastoral attentiveness and imagination, a flexibility which allowed, to use a now familiar phrase, the 'flourishing' of many different kinds of Anglicanism, and which generously affirmed the ministry of so many ordained women.

There is no glossing over the fact that the Church of England's decision about the ordination of women was a source of abiding pain and tension to Geoffrey. That pain and tension grew from his sense of a confused and incomplete theological discernment and (the musical analogy again) what he heard as a tone-deafness to ecumenical concerns and responsibilities. There will be in this Cathedral very different views on that issue. Yet Geoffrey's passion was always for theologically informed discernment, and the grief which that decision gave him was not least about what he saw as a reluctance to engage in difficult, sustained thinking.

All the same, the fact that Anglicans would find theological reasons for doing something he did not approve of did not mean that he believed that there were no longer good reasons for

being Anglican, and the good reasons for being Anglican were constantly at the forefront of his mind and his ministry. They were part of that deeply Tractarian identity which, for so many people, he represented. Because part of that Tractarian DNA is, to put it very bluntly, an assumption that the Church of England is always perfectly likely to let you down, and that this is not the end of the world because Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life. In a time of what you may think is confusion, or even unfaithfulness, dig down, nourish yourself more fully; but be prepared for the personal cost.

Geoffrey worked with myself and our dear friend Kenneth Stevenson on a book entitled *Love's Redeeming Work*, an anthology of spiritual writing in the Anglican tradition. I don't think that Kenneth would mind if I said that the heavy lifting, in terms of the volume as far as the later period was concerned, was done by Geoffrey in his heroic labours on the vast mountain of material from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century. His share of that book reflects those Tractarian roots already mentioned, but it also reflects the generous engagement which made him so open to, and so enthusiastic about, resources well beyond his own tradition, including resources beyond the United Kingdom. His voice was always advocating in the editorial discussions we shared for a better and more accurate representation in the book of Anglicanism outside Europe and North America.

In the introduction to his section of that volume, the last page touches briefly on a number of perhaps predictable theological heroes – Lightfoot and Westcott, of course; Archbishop Michael Ramsey; and then, more surprisingly, Charles Kingsley and Charles Raven. There they are, rubbing shoulders in one paragraph – probably as uncomfortable there in each other's company as they no doubt are in the Kingdom of Heaven. In that paragraph Geoffrey speaks of two things which this unlikely calendar of saints might have in common as representatives of Anglican identity. He speaks of those great Anglican teachers, above all Archbishop Ramsey, for whom 'contemplative prayer was not just for enclosed religious', and he speaks of what he calls the 'characteristically Anglican sympathy with new knowledge': a depth of hinterland in prayer and devotion, a sympathy with new knowledge – never uncritical, but never hostile.

Then, in the last paragraph, he goes on to quote another name familiar to Geoffrey's friends – John Henry Newman, on the Church that 'changes always in order to remain the same'. To believe that at a time of rapid, disorientating change, is particularly hard. But Geoffrey held to that and lived by it; and that is why he turns, at the very end of that introductory essay, to Lancelot Andrewes – and to T. S. Eliot: the tongues of flame in-folded, the fire and the rose one. If Jesus is indeed the resurrection and the life, and if because of that we cannot fall into nothingness, it is because the fiery trial of discipleship and ministry in Christ's Church is not to be separated from the flowering of God's generous purposes and the fulfilment of our humanity in ways we cannot imagine. We do not fall away, for God is God, and Christ is God. Knowing this is the key to knowing ourselves and knowing what song is sung by the whole of reality. Remember Geoffrey's pitch in hearing and singing that song.

And so we endure – as the Apostle says, 'abounding in the work of the Lord', as did Geoffrey so abundantly. And we look with him at the cloud of witnesses, alive with the living Lord whom he adored and adores.