

Homily for the funeral of Gill Nicholls

10 November, 2010

Christopher Rowland

The shock of the news of Gill's final illness, so soon after the memorable occasion of her wedding to John on 14 August, was only matched by hearing of the death of David Nicholls, with whom I had lunch only a few hours before he died. My relationship with Gill over the last fifteen years has been through our work on the David Nicholls Memorial Trust. It was in that context that I witnessed her vivaciousness and enthusiasm and witnessed the growing love and affection between her and John as meeting succeeded meeting, and they complemented each other in overseeing the development of a remarkable enterprise, which told me so much about Gill and her gifts to inspire and enthuse. As a friend of John's for forty years the growing relationship was beautiful to behold. Words cannot express the deep sense of sadness I continue to feel that the relationship that had blossomed before our eyes was so cruelly ended.

What I saw of Gill was a fraction of the person that John and her family knew, and so it is to Jennifer, Gill's sister, first, and then to John, that I now turn as I read what they have written of Gill, whose 'glorious radiance and rootedness', as Rowan Williams has put it, touched so many of us.

First Jennifer: Gillie was born in Preston, to Dudley Sleigh, priest and Aileen. The family moved to Hampshire in 1942 when I was born, so our early years were spent in a country village with wartime and post war rationing and the restrictions of a low clergy stipend. Gillie was sent to boarding school at a very young age, which was difficult for her. Our maternal grandfather was a GP in Northumberland. He was probably a significant influence on her decision to study medicine. She entered the Royal Free Hospital in 1957 and after graduation she developed an interest in paediatrics working for 2 years at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Brighton. During this time she met David, who was about to leave for an

appointment in the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. Gillie followed him there, they married in 1968 and she settled down to work in the orthopaedic hospital and later the Princess Elizabeth Hospital for Children (which she visited earlier this year during John's and her spell in Barbados). After their return to England in the mid-seventies, Gillie was appointed as the paediatrician for the Hugh Ellis Paediatric Assessment Centre based at the Churchill Hospital. In this role she led the development of the service through its crucial early years. Following this she was appointed as Consultant Paediatrician in Cardiff. This necessitated living away from home during the week so she was glad to be appointed consultant paediatrician to Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. During this time Gillie performed the role of vicar's wife to the parish of Littlemore. After David's death she continued to work part time until her retirement.

On a more personal and family note, as my beloved sister, Gillie has been my life long friend, always there for me in difficult times and in times of joy. She and David were a huge support to all of us when my husband died, some 4 years before David. She saw herself, and was felt to be, like a second mother to my five children. She had a talent for bringing joy and fun to people, and she will rightly be remembered in this way. She was also a deeply empathic and thoughtful person who at just the right moments could gently offer support and understanding. She had a deep strength and courage, for despite struggling at times with personal insecurities, she overcame them to allow her generous and caring personality to shine forth and touch all of those around her. This courage helped her through, and was most apparent during her last illness.

And John: I got to know Gill well when I moved back to Oxford in 1990. Richard Harries had asked me where I would like to be attached and I unhesitatingly replied 'Littlemore with my friend David Nicholls'. David would always be inviting me on the spur of the moment after the Sunday Eucharist to come for lunch. I would turn up, and it was obvious that he had not remembered to tell Gill. But there was never any complaint, just open-handed hospitality while she found extra vegetables to make enough for the three of us.

When David died suddenly in 1996, Gill and I supported each other in our grief. I well remember kneeling with her in tears at the vigil in Littlemore before David's funeral. We dedicated ourselves as Chair and Secretary to the

Trust. In the following few years we had what could be called a 'culinary romance'; we cooked for each other and enjoyed table fellowship.

Gill fell ill with uterine cancer in 2004-5 and that brought us even closer together. She weathered the storm, and we all hoped and prayed that the surgeons had done the trick. Shortly afterwards our romance became more than culinary, as we went on cooking holidays together to Italy, Pembrokeshire and Greece. She would always dine with us on Wednesday nights in Mansfield, having earned her supper by helping to fill out the often rather thin congregation at the evening service. Over dinner she entertained all kinds of visiting preachers with her infectious laugh, wit and genuine interest in other people's life stories. I often had to prod her as the staff hovered behind to take away her plate, so wrapt was she in conversation. Gill became a kind of consort to me during my year as Assessor, joining me on various official occasions: a Buckingham Palace garden party, the opening of the Ashmolean, dinner parties with the Vice Chancellor.

We got married in a civil ceremony in February, so that we would not embarrass our hosts at Codrington College in our trip to Barbados in March-April this year. We visited her old friends in Trinidad and Tobago; they all greeted her with great affection and fondest memories. We wanted our church wedding to be a big affair for all our extended families and friends, with Ferris wheel, steel band and fireworks and over 160 guests. Gill looked so beautiful and radiant on that happy day. Through sheer will power and the force of her character she kept going up to that point; but the cancer was waiting to strike, which it did immediately afterwards and with a vengeance.

(John continues) As I said when I made a little speech at the cake cutting ceremony, Gill was a highly distinguished medic, a fabulous cook and a promising artist, but above all the most generous, fun-loving and compassionate person I have had the great privilege and pleasure of knowing. I added then that the clergy are difficult to live with, since they are professionally obliged to be pleasant to others all day, and tend therefore to come home at the end of the day and complain to their partners. Gill the daughter of one, the widow of another and the wife of a third showed either a streak of masochism or evidence of sanctity!

We are in the season of remembrance. Gill taught me how to remember. She

understood the difference between remembrance and nostalgia. The story of the David Nicholls Memorial Trust is in large part a story of Gill, of her love for David and her love for John, but also of her own extraordinary ability to enable the past to fructify the present and to do so with such generosity of spirit. As we have sat in the trustees' meetings in Regent's, surrounded by David's books and effects, there have been reminiscences aplenty, but under her guidance we were shown how to honour someone's memory in ways which were true to the person, without ever losing sight of present challenges: annual lectures on themes dear to David, a book of Haitian images, awareness of the culture and situation of Haitians and the people of the Caribbean & our solidarity with them - especially relevant right now in their plight after effects of the earthquake and hurricane in Haiti - scholarships, support for conferences, as well as the library for consultation. Rowan's word 'rootedness' captures it - all were rooted in David's interest but then transposed into a new key in response to the contemporary world and its challenges. Under her tutelage the Trust has become a vibrant enterprise pervaded with the vitality, which Gill brought to it, in which those of us who are trustees have been privileged to play a part.

It was Nicholas Lash who first introduced me to David nearly 30 years ago, and who, in the memorable title for one of his books, *Easter in Ordinary*, combined words from Herbert and Hopkins which beautifully capture Gill's life. She evinced what is central to Christian remembrance of the resurrection, not with eyes set only on the past or the future - she embodied the Johannine Jesus' words, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. Resurrection life, now, is not an escape from the terrible and painful realities of human life: Martha and Mary learnt that the divine presence was not a talisman against death and suffering. The difficult journey through grief and disorientation, towards healing and life, does not come without struggle and pain, just as in John the seer's vision of the New Jerusalem, God's tabernacling with humans, comes only *after* sorrow and sighing, and only with struggle and patient endurance. But the glimpses of resurrection life, of the tabernacling of God with humans, come now, in the midst of our sadness and bewilderment. Saints like Gill, now part of that great cloud of witnesses who surround us as we run our earthly race, help us see how Christ can already 'Easter in us'. Gill's warmth, generosity, wisdom, and irrepressible sense of fun, remind us that joy and delight is *always* central to the divine service of humanity.

We thank God for her. May she rest in peace.

