

Henry Howard Hanwell Baker 1954-2017

The Reading from the Old Testament's Book of Wisdom (3:1-6, 9) is a text that Howard was fond of choosing for funeral liturgies here in this Cathedral; and he asked that it be read for this, his very own, Requiem Mass today. It a statement of the faith in which he lived and died:

*The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God.
No torment shall ever touch them.
In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die,
their going looked like a disaster,
their leaving us, like annihilation;
but they are in peace.*

Howard was born in South Shields on 18 February 1954, the son of Harry and Gwen and brother of Elizabeth, Martin and Bruce. He went to St Bede's Catholic Primary School in South Shields before going on to St Aidan's, the Catholic Secondary School for boys in Sunderland.

From an early age, Howard was a studious pupil. A priest who knew him then, Fr Vincent Melia, told me that when the young Howard was asked one year by his parents what he would like for Christmas, he said: 'a typewriter'. However, Howard wasn't a swot – he was good at rugby and was a keen squash player in later years as well. But he was 'brainy', so much so that he succeeded in gaining entry to Oxford University to study Classics and Philosophy.

Understandably, Howard found Oxford daunting at first but he eventually came to enjoy his days there, including the social occasions that form such a part of university life. He reminded me recently of an incident back then when someone asked him what his father did for a living. Howard replied that his father was a pitman. When the enquirer looked perplexed, Howard explained that his father was a miner. 'Oh, he's in mining, is he?', came the reply. No, said Howard, he's a *miner!*

Howard graduated from Oxford in 1976 and then went to Durham University for a year to gain his PGCE. It was here at Durham that he and Christine, whom he had known for some time, became close and they married three years later at St Benet's, Sunderland. They were blessed with a daughter, Harriet, in 1984 and just four years ago became the proud and doting grandparents of Hamish.

After gaining his PGCE, Howard began his teaching career at the Royal Grammar School in Newcastle, and remained there for the next 35 years until retirement. He began by teaching French and Spanish, even though these were not his 'subjects', but he eventually got to teach Latin and Greek. He became the school librarian, ran the Debating Society, helping with school camps and founded a new Philosophy Society.

In due course, but to Howard's surprise, the headmaster, Alister Cox, offered him the post of Head of Religious Studies. As Howard was a Catholic, and a committed one at that, this was quite a bold choice for the RGS and 'permission' had to be sought before the appointment could be confirmed. In the following years Howard took over the pastoral care of the Fifth Form; he ran the heads of department meetings; and became Head of Sixth Form – a post, Howard said, 'where I got great fulfilment from helping out sixth formers and their families who were finding life just a bit tough'. Finally - 'so that I might perhaps begin to ease off before full retirement' – he gave up the Sixth Form job to take on a new post of giving a lead with learning support for pupils.

In a tribute penned to mark his retirement, Alastair Cox said that Howard 'shouldered a multiplicity of roles with apparent ease but above all we learned to appreciate him for the person he is'. He went on: 'Howard has of course agreeable surface qualities (poise, self-confidence, courtesy, humour, seriousness), but what makes him special is that these are all reflections of an inner character of outstanding integrity and rare quality.'

In the school's annual Founder's Service, the Bidding includes the following:

*We give thanks
for the devoted service of those who have taught here,
for their love of sound learning,
their understanding hearts,
and their lasting influence on mind and character.*

I am sure that many people – fellow staff, pupils and parents, especially those taking part in this Requiem Mass today - would agree that nobody inhabited that daunting ideal more than Howard.

Howard was a teacher also beyond the school gates, never more so than here at St Mary's Cathedral where he gave outstanding service and his innumerable talents bore remarkable fruit.

I first met Howard 20 years ago after I was appointed Dean of the Cathedral. Not long afterwards, he accepted the invitation to form a new Cathedral Choir. With the assistance of organist David Allison, he took to the task with delight but also with his customary dedication, seriousness and thoroughness of preparation. The choir grew, its repertoire, which included Plainchant, expanded and the major feasts of the Catholic calendar were richly celebrated. Not surprisingly, this led to lovers of the Church's rich musical tradition, not available in their own parishes, joining the Cathedral congregation. And for every celebration, including the principal Sunday Mass, Howard produced an elegant Service Sheet that was a hallmark of his style and an integral component of the congregation's participation in the liturgy. Apart from a few adaptations here and there, the Service Sheet for Howard's Requiem was compiled by him before he died.

Not long after forming the choir, Howard founded the Cathedral magazine, *Sursum Corda*. In all, with the help of a small editorial panel, he produced 61 issues of the magazine which was published three or four times a year. He named it *Sursum Corda*, the Latin for 'Lift up your hearts', the injunction the celebrant at Mass makes to the congregation at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer. The magazine highlighted the features of this historic building; celebrated the lives of people who worshipped here; and provided a range of stimulating articles to encourage readers to raise their sights to a higher place. It was another example of Howard's extraordinary dedication of time to something he believed in.

Howard's emergence at St Mary's coincided with the late Mgr Kevin Nichols coming to reside here in 1998. Howard, along with his teaching colleague Simon Barker, devoted many hours to collating and editing Kevin's writings, and brought out two collections of Kevin's poetry, all under the imprint of Howard's *Sursum Corda Publications*. These, and his many other publications for the Cathedral, were of the highest, most exemplary and professional quality. Those last eight years of Kevin's life were his most productive as a poet and hymn-writer, thanks to Howard and Simon bringing to light Kevin's largely unrecognised and extraordinary gift.

By the late 1990s the fabric of this historic building was tired and worn, and for a Cathedral it was lacking the facilities to enable it to play its role in the spiritual, cultural and social life of the city. In our setting out to redress this, Howard played a significant part as a member of the design team that collaborated with architect Kevin Doonan and stained-glass artist Joseph Nuttgens. For the magnificent new developments that took place – notably the stained-glass windows, floor tiles, organ, Blessed Sacrament Chapel screen and other brass designs, as well as the new café and bookshop - Howard brought all his talents to bear. And to these one must also add his part with founding the *Friends of the Cathedral*, establishing the Cardinal Hume Memorial Lectures, his involvement with the visit of HM The Queen, and his devising the information panels in the entrance to the church from the bookshop. His stamp is everywhere.

In a quiet corner of the crypt in St Paul's Cathedral in London, there is a plain monument of stone to the architect Christopher Wren. He designed St Paul's after the original was destroyed by the Great Fire in 1666. The monument ends with the Latin words: *Si monumentum requiris circumspice* which is usually translated: *If you would seek my memorial, look around you*. Although Howard would be embarrassed with the association with Wren, surely the same must be said of Howard and St Mary's? But in Howard's case, I don't think this is enough so I wonder, Fr Dermott, if a way might be found to have something, however small, located somewhere in the building to honour Howard whose contribution, I feel, far outshines anything we clergy may achieve for this sacred space?

Unfortunately, Howard did not have the long and healthy retirement we all wished for him. Although his health deteriorated, this did not stop him from making the most of his retirement. He was able to spend more time with Christine, his absolute rock, travelling abroad, going on sea cruises, taking up

ballroom dancing (the Tango was his favourite), indulging his passion for reading, and making frequent trips to visit Harriet and Hamish in Edinburgh. He was devoted to his family and equally adored by them. With them, as with all of us, he wore his learning lightly, never showing off or being dismissive, and although happy to take a lead he was equally happy to remain in the background.

There is a verse in the Book of Common Prayer, usually recited while a corpse is being laid in the earth, which Howard requested we use at his Funeral Mass:

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we are in death ...

It's a brutally stark truth which Howard believed one had to come to terms with if life was to be lived to the full. In recent months as his condition deteriorated, he readily accepted, without quibble, that his life was coming to an end. When his last illness struck, he declined further treatment. Just hours before he died, he told me that he had done everything he wanted in life, that he was grateful for the good things that had come his way, and that although he did not want to leave Christine, Harriet and Hamish, he was ready for death and accepted it. In saying goodbye to him, I thanked Howard for being such an inspiration to so many of us whose lives he had graced, for bringing the best out of us, and for all he had done for this Cathedral and the (Catholic) community that treasures it.

As death drew nearer, Howard was remarkably calm and inspiringly courageous. In my 42 years as a priest, I have never been in the presence of anyone facing imminent death with such measured grace. That 'inner character of outstanding integrity and rare quality' was there right to the end. After he received the Church's anointing – 'fortified by the rites of holy Mother Church', as Howard would say - and with Christine and Harriet by his side, Howard died on Sunday 24 September in the faith by which he lived and inspired so many.

Howard's last contribution to this Cathedral was to play a leading part in the discussions with Joseph Nuttgens for a new stained glass window to celebrate Kevin Nichols. Latterly he made his contribution by email from his hospital bed, and his final message was to express his delight with the completed design. The window will be completed and installed early next year and its central panel will contain a short prayer which Kevin Nichols composed and is carved on Kevin's headstone at Minsteracres:

Master, let your grace, lightsome as a snowflake, settle upon us.

Twenty years after Kevin composed it, Howard resurrected the prayer from obscurity and reproduced it in a beautiful card. As Howard's choice of Reading from the Book of Wisdom ends with the words: *grace and mercy await those he has chosen*, for Howard we now offer Kevin's prayer:

Master, let your grace, lightsome as a snowflake, settle upon Howard.

Michael Champion

9 October 2017