

LADY SUSAN HOWARD

25th April 2018

Castle Howard Chapel

The beauty of this Service is that it reflects Susan's life. It falls to me to encourage us at this sad time and to talk about Susan's faith.

Susan loved this Chapel. With all the enthusiasm of a Church Warden, which she was for many years at Tew in Oxfordshire, she organised the Eucharist here on Christmas Day, just four months ago. And through her the following week on the eve of New Year we broadcast the Service on BBC Radio 4 in which she read to the nation the story of the birth of Christ. That service touched the lives of many people not least Susan herself. The climax of the story as we have just heard is the gathering of the Wise Men around the Christ Child offering their gifts in worship. How appropriate that she should have read that passage for it is her faith and ours, however feebly held, that Susan herself now is in that gathering around the throne of Christ offering herself in perfect worship.

Susan loved poetry especially that of John Donne and could recite his poems and passages of Shakespeare. The beautiful poem we have heard in this service speaks of that Holy Room, to the door of which we are all bound. In that Room Donne envisages a choir of the saints who not only make music in Heaven but are themselves made music. In other words through their redemption they become music to the ears of God. This was her faith that we rejoice in today that Susan herself has been made music and her presence in Heaven is music to the ears of God however much we miss her with our tears.

Susan loved the world of nature and could name plants and trees and flowers even with all their Latin names. Nature is full of pictures of seeds falling into the ground and dying, only to rise again with new life. If that is true of a Jasmine Tree, expressed in that lovely poem read by Philip, how much truer must it be for us who have been called to share the earth with all creatures and to care for them. At the heart of the Christian Faith is the belief that we too fall into the ground like a seed only to be raised to life in a new and spiritual body.

Susan loved to travel. All travellers, walkers and pilgrims know that point on the road when you have journeyed far enough and your body begins to ache and you long to rest. We all know that special rest when you lay your head on the pillow and fall into the deepest sleep. Those exhausting journeys are a metaphor for life itself. We journey as far as we can until one day our need for eternal rest overwhelms us. It was a great privilege to be called to Susan's bedside first in Coral Cottage and then in Malton Hospital and to pray with her in the presence of Flora, Alexander and Hu; and to sense the aura of peace around her. Her body exhausted by the journey and ready for that deepest of sleeps that ends in a new dawn with the music of Heaven.

Susan loved to serve – her family, the community, and latterly here in this place at Castle Howard through her friendship with Vicky and Nick. Her earthly body will be laid to rest at her beloved childhood home at Naworth Castle. The Carlisle Family motto is,

“I am willing but not able”.

These are perfect words for all of us as we contemplate that last step from the land of the dying to the world of the truly alive. That last step can seem so impossible, so unattainable. Yet it is at that moment that we look to the great Shepherd of the sheep to carry us over the threshold of eternity. As Susan lay dying I spoke the words of the 23rd Psalm. ‘Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for Thou art with me; Thy Rod and Thy staff they comfort me’.

I sometimes think that the shadow is that which is cast by the one who is dying as they walk towards the opening door of that Holy Room which is filled with light. Out of that eternal and uncreated Light the Great Shepherd of the sheep reaches out to us to embrace us with the words,

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant”.

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life, dear Susan, for you have entered into the House of the Lord forever”.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE