

JOHN COLE
Service of Thanksgiving
Thursday 5 May 2011 at St Mary's Church, Alverstoke

Address by The Revd. Humphrey Prideaux.
(Humphrey taught Maths and Computing at Price's College, 1980-1984)

This pulpit is where John stood, each Michaelmas. He compéred our 'Not the last night of the Proms', with his jokes of all flavours. If his manuscripts of those jokes survive, shouldn't they be put in our church archives?

When we meet together, after the service, let's share those jokes; the only one I can remember is Christmas in heaven: a joke about knickers. It says in scripture that Jesus wept. I regret it never says 'Jesus laughed', because he must have done. John could tell jokes, yes, but he was never one of those extroverts who hog the centre of attention. He was a good listener; he smiled and laughed at what we said – because he loved people as they are. And that's why we loved him. Greek has four words for love – sometimes English is less adequate to express, not Eros, but the deep friendship that we can have one for another. A friendship we treasure and now grieve to lose.

He inherited musical gifts from his mother, a pianist, and from his father, who might have been an opera singer if the First World War hadn't intervened. Adrian Knight goes back to the 40's to John's singing at the youth club entertainment in the Broderick Hall – a pastiche of Gilbert & Sullivan. Adrian says, "He could sing - but he couldn't dance!" For John, music was part of the whole person, not just a hobby – and we are grateful for this gift that he just accepted and revelled in.

John was a Gosport boy. He went to Leesland School then Gosport Grammar, Bay House. Evacuated to Eastleigh he became homesick and transferred to Price's School, Fareham, with the great headmaster George Ashton. He was joint head boy with his friend, and later maths colleague, Roy Daysh. He was good at school sport; he played soccer for Gosport – referred to as 'danger-man Cole' in the local paper. Cricket he kept going for decades in the Price's staff team.

From school came National Service repairing Radar in the Navy, just after the war.

Maths was always his great love. He just missed a first at Portsmouth Polytechnic. He had to work hard at his maths; it didn't come easily. Some people fear maths. For others it has a beauty and a logic that excites and humbles. The probing into the mysteries of the universe is led by mathematics: science and technology follow. And some would see the hand of God in the statistical improbabilities involved in the facts of creation itself. Is this the transcendent mystery of maths? That it is more than just man-made number systems?

Then in 1951 he went as a representative of this church to an interchurch conference at Bangor University. There, as Irene says, in one week it was love at first sight – Irene, a Methodist, trainee PE teacher in Yorkshire, John, an Anglican, now at London for his Post-Graduate Certificate in Education.

So, no surprise, John gets a job in Yorkshire, at Batley Grammar School – having to say Graph paper (short a) instead of Graph paper (long a). And Irene is teaching at nearby Cleckheaton.

They marry 4th April 1953. Some couples are really blessed. As the Bishop of London said last Friday – ‘In marriage man and woman help each other to become what God meant each one to be, their deepest and truest selves’.

Fifty-eight years. We thank you, Irene, for your togetherness with John among us, your hospitality together, your mutual care. Thank you too for the greatest gift you could give him, tender love and care, at home, till the end.

They were not long in Yorkshire. He was headhunted at 28 to be Head of Maths back at Price's, just as later he headhunted John Tomlinson to join him. Do we teach a student? Or do we teach a subject? For John it was both. As ‘Sooty Cole’ he soon had a great reputation. Each student was a person in their own right, and maths needed to be fun. He was tempted by a job at Portsmouth Poly where he taught evening classes – but chose to stay at Price's. It was more centred on the individual student. With him many people discovered their talents. He taught all ages. From his Further Maths group of 1979, one boy became Professor of Medical Statistics at Harvard, another Chief Project Designer at Westlands Helicopters. He was generous with his time – his maths coaching helped many, some to get Firsts in their Maths Degrees. Two years ago he coached a local boy to an A in GCSE. If that was his talent, Irene's talent was to help students with Special Needs at Brune Park. They both used their gifts.

John became Deputy Head at Price's School. His study was chaotic but he knew where everything was. He wrestled to make the timetable work, with John Chaffey. Then, he became Vice Principal, as Price's became a comprehensive Sixth Form College. As he said, ‘I'm one of the three Vices’. He organised the exams with Sid Bailey. I remember his anguished: ‘They've given her the wrong paper’. Luckily it was a paper common to different syllabuses. Some of us still believe it was a wrong and bad decision to join together the two Colleges in Fareham in 1984. John retired – to do what? To teach maths at Portsmouth Grammar School. And during those years he was able to sing tenor in Portsmouth Cathedral Choir nearby – until he was 65.

What was John's Christian faith? I don't know; we didn't discuss it. He lived it in deeds not words. For many, their faith is as deeply personal as their love life. Religion can change people - for the worse. It can make us sanctimonious, self righteous and artificial. Not John. Acceptance of others was too important. Harmony, and a smile to defuse tension took the place of argument. He had wise mentors. Jesus asked Peter to help him – to lend him a boat. The rector here asked John to help him – to serve at the altar, to lead the youth club. Later he became Bill Reis' Church Warden.

Many have their faith fall away in their teens – why did this not happen to John? Was it his family, Price's School, his maths and other study? Was it his prayers, the story of Jesus, other Christians? I don't know. Whatever it was, John responded to God's initiative towards him.

Was it his music? Not just the tunes but the words? When we sing 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'; or 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help'; does it not lift our souls?

Above all, surely, as for many, it was in his experience of loving and being loved that he glimpsed more than human love – and trusted that death could not end that love.

John knew that we here would each have different views of God, Jesus, death and heaven. He would want each of us to hold to our personal integrity. That is who we are. We all want to give thanks for his life – some of us want to give thanks to God for what God was able to do in him. John would not have wanted to be the centre of attention here today. That's why he chose these two particular hymns, 'When morning gilds the skies...' and 'How bright those glorious spirits shine!' – both focused not on him or us, but on Christ and on heaven. That's why he chose Handel's 'I know that my redeemer liveth', that Sylvia Lock sang for us and for him. He would want us to support those who grieve his death the most.

He himself was at peace; he had confessed his sins; he had prayed and given thanks; he had received Holy Communion; sad for those who miss him so dreadfully; content to let go; surrounded by love.

This morning we committed his worn out body to be cremated. We read St. Paul's chapter on love from 1 Corinthians 13:

"Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.
Now we know in part; then we shall know as we are known.
Now abide faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love."