

## *From the UK*

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### **FOR BILL...**

### **SERMON PREACHED AT REQUIEM MASS, SHERBORNE ABBEY, 10 MAY 2022, BY THE REVD CANON DR MALCOLM BROWN.**

#### **Who was Bill Cave?**

You won't find him by that name in Crockford's Clerical Directory or, I imagine, on his birth certificate. But the journey from being Bernard James William Cave-Browne-Cave to plain Bill Cave - from 33 letters to just 8 - was no inverted snobbery or attempt to be more proletarian than thou. It was, I think, just one way in which an extraordinarily complex man tried, throughout his life, to choose simplicity over complexity wherever he could. Those closest to him in recent years, to whom he was definitely William rather than Bill, perhaps understood that, in choosing the virtues of simplicity in his approach to life, he never ceased to be a person of great depth, numerous layers, some contradictions and an uncanny ability to make unexpected connections.

Many who knew Bill would have been struck by the fundamental simplicity of his approach to life - the image of Bill folding his lanky frame into the tiny Fiat 500 he owned as a student, driving with his knees up to his chin, lingers on for those privileged to have seen it - but the story was always more complicated than that.

One very important aspect of Bill's commitment to simplicity was in his approach to ministry and priesthood. He was, I think, almost completely devoid of conventional personal ambition. He never mapped out career moves in order to be noticed or with the aim of preferment. At the Westcott House Revue in 1978 he wrote and sang a parody of "I Believe" poking fun at those who had episcopal office

in their sights even before being ordained as deacon. It was, rather, as if his various roles in the church over more than 40 years of ministry were dictated by chance or the circumstances of the moment - or maybe the Holy Spirit moving in its most mysterious ways. But the factor that remained constant through all those years was that his deepest commitment was to the invisible people in society whose response to his ministry would be equally unnoticed.

Cambridge, when Bill was a student there, was a magnet for vagrants and those with nothing to their names. Often, in those days, they would be the old-style dossers with the matted grey beards, old greatcoats and broken boots. Bill combined his training for ministry with a very direct ministry to people like that through the Cambridge branch of the Cyreneans of which he soon became the Chair. It was direct support for people who most of the city failed even to see - support given with no ostentation but with great organisational skill, and a profound understanding that real pastoral care isn't an emotional reaction to problems but a complex negotiation between people, agencies and systems - personalising the impersonal. Paradoxically, it takes simplicity of character to handle that level of complexity without cynicism.

I am sure Bill had no idea at the time how his involvement with the Cyreneans would be a kind of motif of his priesthood for the rest of his life. But it makes the choice of today's first reading from Isaiah - which, of course, is repeated by Jesus at the start of his ministry as his own manifesto - an inevitable and fitting word, because that was Bill's manifesto too.

Always, for Bill, ministry was about the people beyond the church, and often those beyond the boundaries of normal polite society. Despite his years as an effective parish priest on Cambridge's Arbury estate, it was probably inevitable that his ministry thereafter should be mainly in chaplaincy - among students at Lancaster University; for many, many years in the prison service, and latterly as chaplain to Wiltshire Police.

Chaplaincy is an ambiguous vocation in many ways. An effective chaplain must be a bridge - with one abutment rooted firmly in the church and the other unequivocally and solidly grounded in the institutions of the secular realm. That in itself is a balancing act which many find impossible to maintain, and there are chaplains who never make it beyond the little world of the church to have any real grasp of the lives of those outside it and, conversely, others for whom the church becomes no more than an embarrassing encumbrance.

But Bill was a true bridge - and many people made the journey in both directions, thanks to him, between the church and the worlds of higher education, prison and policing.

Chaplains rarely see much of the fruits of their ministry - they can't gauge success in terms of large and flourishing congregations or public recognition. But it is surprising how many people of faith, asked about their spiritual life journey, recall the pivotal influence of a chaplain at a stage when the direction of the journey was uncertain.

For all those years, Bill maintained a ministry of deep compassion and skilled counsel without any of the direct rewards and affirmation that most of us need if we are to feel confident that our work matters. He worked hard to maintain his embeddedness on both sides of the bridge he represented: alongside full time chaplaincy, he took on regular spells of interim parochial ministry in Scotland and latterly he did a week a year as a duty chaplain at Westminster Abbey - the quiet, unsung, ministry of the church kept him grounded and connected to God.

And Bill was equally embedded in the secular side of chaplaincy, knowing when, from that lonely position behind the dog collar, it was imperative to speak truth to power and to confront injustices and the inhumanity of institutions. As a prison and police chaplain, Bill also had a huge respect and concern for the people who bear responsibility in those services and take on heavy responsibilities which most people would shun. He understood that the casualties of an inhumane society are not only those at the very bottom of the

pile. He took up the study of law, not to become a barrack room lawyer in clerical garb, but to understand better the milieu in which he worked - from every angle.

It was as if Bill's life, his ministry and his spirituality led him into ever more complex questions, all of which he approached in a spirit of simple enquiry, seeking to understand, because understanding the contexts of other people is the precursor to loving them.

And so, in exploring the implications of faith with students, he found himself getting to know communities on both sides of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and across the divides of Israel/Palestine, as he helped young people to appreciate the roots and dynamics of persistent conflict. There was no pretention that he came with answers or solutions, but just the simple conviction that justice and reconciliation have to begin with understanding and empathy. As a prisoner, and later a police chaplain, he was the first in both cases to build international links between chaplains in different cultures and political climates, so that learning and experience could be shared and chaplaincy flourish for the benefit of others. It will be no surprise that Bill was always committed to the "life and works" strand of ecumenism and, building on the experience of multifaith chaplaincy in the prison service, became an expert diocesan adviser on inter-religious relations after his retirement from the service.

Over the years, Bill's vocation cannot have been an easy one to follow. His cannot have been - indeed, often was not - an easy life to live. Perhaps it was his music that sustained him through the toughest stretches. His trumpet playing was legendary - and it grew out of the sheer hard graft of constant practice. Many were the retreat houses, geared for silence and contemplation, who were disconcerted to have Bill there on retreat but asking for a suitable space to play the trumpet loudly.... Practice, for Bill, was not an option when you felt like doing it, but a discipline you didn't shirk. And, of course, he sang - not least, in the choir here at the Abbey. In music, as in ministry, Bill turned his talents toward the ensemble effect rather than putting himself centre-stage.

After all these years, you think you know someone well and, at the end, you realise how much more there was to know. Each person here will have their own memories of Bill - but we are here, not just because we loved him, but because, in his simple and straightforward way, he loved us. He didn't go on and on about love, although his devotion to his family, to James and to Lucy, could never be doubted and, latterly, Anne's love brought out a more demonstrative side of Bill that had been somewhat under wraps. And yet love, I think, is the deep explanation of the complex man who longed to live simply, who blew his own trumpet only in the literal and not the metaphorical sense - this very human creature who knew only too well his own flaws and failings, but who lived out his life on behalf of some of the least and most difficult people who found themselves otherwise locked up or locked out.

I don't know how conscious he was of being the object of God's love himself, but many glimpsed that love through him, and today's gospel reading captures the reality of that love which is there in Christ to sustain us all now, and into the future. And the church he served is the richer for the life of this priest who was content, in the imagery of one of Jesus's parables, to faithfully shovel the compost around the roots of the unpromising fig tree of prison, police or university life, and to delight in such fruits as it came to bear.

That is a simple image of a life well lived - however it may have felt from inside Bill's skin at the time. I don't know how often he felt appreciated in his lifetime, especially by the church he served so faithfully, but we can say now, I believe with confidence, that this complex man, and simple priest, will have heard the words from the fountain head - well done, good and faithful servant.





