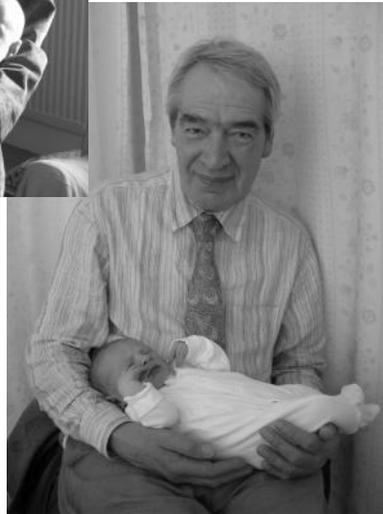


BISHOP ALAN SMITHSON



1936-2010

OBITUARY FOR THE RIGHT REVD ALAN SMITHSON

Born 1 December 1936; died 17 June 2010

BISHOP ALAN SMITHSON, who died suddenly on 17 June after several months of failing health, was born and brought up in Bradford. Convinced of his call to ordination as a boy, he devoted his whole life to the care of people without regard to their background or allegiance.

Alan was the younger of two brothers, whose father Herbert was superintendent of the Sunday School in their local church. His parents was determined that Alan should have academic opportunities they had not had; so he attended Bradford Boys' Grammar School and gained a place at Queen's College, Oxford. Before his university career, Alan completed a period of National Service as a medical orderly. He read Greats (Classics, Ancient History and Philosophy) at Queen's, where the Chaplain was the Revd David Jenkins. Alan later reflected on his Oxford years: 'David Jenkins (my college chaplain for four years), more than anyone else, shaped the way I think and approach theology.' These years illuminated Alan's vision for ordination, and also brought him together with Jean, a student at St Hilda's College. While Alan was preparing for ordination at Queen's College, Birmingham, Jean was pursuing her career as a psychiatric social worker.

The summer of 1964 brought several landmark events: Alan spent a final term at St George's College, Jerusalem, and returned home only days before his marriage to Jean; then, only three weeks later, after a brief honeymoon, came his ordination to a title at Christ Church, Skipton, in his home diocese of Bradford. He remained grateful throughout his life for the guidance and inspiration of his training incumbent, Canon Maurice Slaughter.

In Skipton began Alan's a lifelong enjoyment of work with young people; which found an expression in each of his subsequent, and very different, jobs. Alan moved back to Oxford in 1968 to a second curacy, at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin. When shortly afterwards, David Jenkins moved to new work in Geneva, Alan was appointed pastoral chaplain at Queen's alongside his curacy.

In 1972, Alan was invited to become Chaplain at Reading University, a secular foundation with no chapel at that point. Sunday evenings in the Smithsons' home saw lively gatherings of young adults exploring their own faith

with the help of guests from a range of Christian and other traditions. After five years the Bishop of Reading asked Alan to be Vicar of Bracknell, to help establish a team ministry in an expanding new town. Here, in a very different setting, he could again challenge young adults to explore their faith in a radical way; many attended lectures and seminars in the New Towns Studies in Christian Theology programme.

In 1983 Alan was appointed Director of the Carlisle Diocesan Training Institute, leader of the Diocesan Training Team, and Residentiary Canon of Carlisle Cathedral. He and Jean were delighted to be part of a lively cathedral community led by Dean Jack Churchill. The non-residential training of ordinands was gathering pace, but with slender resources of money and people: even the geography of Cumbria presented challenges, with many late nights of travelling, for which Alan appreciated the companionship of his dog Shadow. He was a wise and caring colleague. Young people in the Cathedral had a teacher who made Confirmation preparation enjoyable and memorable. His preaching was fresh and immediate. Above all, he delighted in talking with anyone who was prepared to think about life and faith with imagination and without preconceptions.

It was during the Carlisle years that Alan Smithson developed his interest in other faiths. He extended his own studies of the Jewish, and later Muslim, traditions, including a sabbatical in the United States in 1989. Soon after his return came the invitation from David Jenkins (by now Bishop of Durham) to be Bishop of Jarrow. This new post, which lasted for eleven years until retirement in 2001, opened yet more opportunities for all of Alan's interests and concerns: adult education, training for ministry, contact with young people, the encouragement of inter-faith friendships, and preaching which took the hearers to the heart of the Gospel. Many clergy found in Bishop Alan an attentive and loving pastor. Everything was coloured by his lifelong love of poetry, music, and painting. He cared little for some of the trappings of the episcopate, but delighted in the encounters with a huge range of people and situations.

One of the most widely publicised aspects of his work as Bishop of Jarrow was his decision to study the Qu'ran during Lent in 1997 – erroneously reported as 'giving up the Bible for Lent'. The resulting polarisation of opinions was not helpful; indeed, many reactions were hurtful to Alan, who grew increasingly convinced that the future of the global community will depend

more than anything else on whether Jews, Muslims and Christians can find a way of living together in peace and mutual respect. “We need to help the Church understand other faiths, not as rivals, but as fellow travellers,” he said on many occasions. Alan sought to bring this conciliatory attitude to bear in the follow-up to ‘9/11’ and the Iraq war. At his farewell service in Durham Cathedral, attended by 2000 people, there were prayers for peace offered by representatives of at least five other faiths. In the Diocese of Durham, as in all the other places where Alan worked, he will be remembered for a way of life marked by gentleness, generosity, and devotion to his family; the only person he judged was himself.



Bishop Alan retired to Creetown in Galloway in 2002, and then moved in 2007 to Musselburgh. In both places he has been content to exercise a humble, supportive priestly ministry. In addition he was External Moderator of the Theological Institute of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Chair of the Pastoral Committee of the Missions to Seafarers, Chaplain of the Church Lads Brigade, and Chaplain of Musselburgh Sea Cadets. He was keen to continue his interfaith work in Scotland, and was also a member of the Ecumenical Bishops’ Group of the Focolare Movement.

Alan is survived by Jean, four grown-up children, their partners and two young grandsons. His funeral was celebrated with a Eucharist in St Mark’s, Portobello, on Wednesday 23rd June. A Memorial Service will follow later in the year.

*(Canon) Richard Hill
Printed in the Church Times*

I will treasure the memory I have of Bishop Alan being a gentle, intuitive and caring man. This year on Mothering Sunday, I deliberately came in to church late and sat at the back, knowing that if I could get through the service without crying, it would be something. Since my mum's traumatic death in 2007 I have yet to get better at coping with special days like Mothering Sunday. At the end of the service I couldn't move as I was crying so much and was trying to cry quietly that I just sat with my head down and tried to cover my face with my hair, hoping that people would think that I was praying. Bishop Alan came and sat next to me and just sat. After a few minutes I looked up to see that he was praying. When I looked up again he smiled his gentle smile and said "Jenni I know today is a difficult day for you and I thank God for the gift of tears and I hope you gain comfort from knowing that others care." He then didn't say anything as I babbled and bubbled ~ he just sat and listened ~ something he did so well. I will always remember how he reached out to me in my time of need, and be grateful for it. I will also remember his wonderful knitted tie and how it reminded me of Wallace and Grommit ~ Wensleydale anyone!

Jenni Daly

Of the many people who have crossed my path of life so far, Bishop Alan brought me personally so much. There are many words which describe this wonderful shepherd of people but perhaps for me it is "caring". He always had time to listen and offer help whenever possible. He had many gifts which he brought to his ministry at St Marks but to me his love and care were his primary gifts.

Pat Cant

My memory is of helping Bishop Alan to tie bows at our wreath making sessions before the Christmas Fair. We hadn't spoken too much on previous occasions but he wasn't having very much luck with the bows and we had an amusing time getting to know each other. We reached a compromise! He would tie them and then I would pretty them up. A lovely man.

June Jeffrey

Gentle, Informative, Welcoming with an interested sparkle in his eyes.

Bert

I remember Bishop Alan taking a children's service. Baby Callum crawled up to him and gazed up at him as he talked. Bishop Alan simply stood and spoke back to Callum. It was a lovely picture that I will always remember.

Dorothy.

Bishop Alan was a man that I will never forget. He was without doubt the kindest and most softly spoken man I have ever known, a true 'gentleman'. In the short time that I knew him he seemed to me to be a very intelligent man, a man who's mind was open to all other religions, possibilities. I can imagine that he never made anyone feel like they were wrong in their opinion (even if he disagreed) nor make anyone feel like they had failed. He was far too kind for that...I can only aspire to be so open minded and non judgemental as he was. It is a great loss to us all...

Nicola Collins

One of my favourite memories of Bishop Alan is of a sermon he gave at a family service when baby Calum shuffled over on his bottom and just sat in front of him looking up at Bishop Alan totally mesmerised. Bishop Alan directed his whole sermon to Calum and it made us all smile.

Shirley Shepley

Could write a book about Bishop Alan - what a great guy! But briefly for mag:- Kenny and I had the great pleasure for the last 3 years of being the Smithson's "first foot" on New Year's Day. Great memories of sitting in their front room, walls adorned with Alan's beautiful watercolours, enjoying a glass of Highland Park (the Bishop's favourite) and one of Jean's extra-delicious mince pies!

Kathryn McKenzie

Bishop Alan Smithson was a remarkable man: a scholar with a fine intellect; cultured; compassionate and caring; a true Christian. I am privileged to have met him. I wish I had known him longer.

Sally Ferguson

Every time I go into the little chapel I will feel his presence and every time I have a glass of Highland Park whisky I will remember his gentle warm knowledgeable ways.

Kenny

I have two clear memories of Bishop Alan. One Saturday the cleaning party was washing the church floor and he and I (being among the 'younger and stronger' members present) were moving all the chairs. I said to him "there can't be many churches where the Bishop rolls up his sleeves and joins in". The other is preserved in Callum's film where Bishop Alan was listening to the 'sermon' and bowed his head.

Bridget.

Memories of Bishop Alan – a man who walked humbly with God.

+Alan was a man with great theological understanding and wisdom who translated that into small loving and caring ways. His face shone with the love of God and of all people. Forgiveness and mercy were second nature to him, and his ability to make you feel as if you were the only person in the room was something I shall never forget. And what a memory for poetry, quotes and music which he could recall for every type of situation, whether pastoral, teaching or preaching. Everything he did was undergirded with prayer and to sit in his presence was to know the sacrament of the present moment.

Humble, modest, caring, loving, kind, patient, a gentleman and gentle man. Those and so many more adjectives could describe +Alan. He was always there for me, willing to listen and always to affirm. Love was his meaning.

Ruth Innes

Having you as the Chaplain of our Sea Cadet Unit in Musselburgh has made such a difference. It is good to see you around and talking to all of us and being so interested in what we do. Telling us about your time with the sailors and your own time on a boat made it easier for us who are just learning about these things.

Thank you, we all shall miss you.

Bon Voyage.

From the Musselburgh Sea Cadets and Staff.

Alan, your cheery smile, compassion and interest in all of our family and their lives heartened us all. We recall fondly the children assisting you in the church services and the positive impression you made upon them; they will surely remember that all of their own lives. Being a wise counsellor, good listener and above all a friend to us all is surely the work of the Lord.

We thank God for knowing you!

From all the Cleghorn family, (including Gill, Clare and Deanna)

I will never forget Bishop Alan's lovely, gentle smile and ready ear. I will miss him a lot. He was also very interested in the children.

Isobel Hutchinson.

He was a lovely, gentle, kind, thoughtful, wonderful person.

Marjorie.

" what a softly spoken gentle caring man, who had time to listen."

Yvonne Kerray.

As some people might know, the reredos behind the high altar is not quite what it seems to be at first sight! The lower third was left bare plaster when the altar was moved forward away from the wall. A former Rector (Timm Engh) thought it could be improved, so I undertook to try and do something about it. I painted it to resemble English alabaster, first in water-based paint, and finally in oils!

I recall with pleasure the quiet few weeks in September 2008 with Bishop Alan, because he wanted to know how to do it, when he and I sat painting (or was it forging?!).

(I now need to tell some more people how to do it.)

It was quiet and peaceful, and we felt there was something restorative spiritually as well as being actually restorative!

Sheila M. Love

As Sacristicians we will remember Bishop Alan as a real gentleman. He always thanked us all for helping him with the service before and after.

On a Thursday morning we had many a laugh with him when he couldn't get the microphone working. He was a lovely man and we loved him.

Agnes Ross

Jamie was asked to play the part of 'Boy Bishop' at the family service in December 2009. As Ruth dressed him in white and gold robes, Bishop Alan arrived with his Mitre and Crook. Looking at Jamie he said 'something's missing—I know...' and he took off his own wooden cross from around his neck and placed it around Jamie's.

We were so proud that Bishop Alan shared his 'Bishop-ness' with Jamie.

Eric, Sheena & Jamie



So many happy things to remember!

At the Thursday Eucharist after The Gospel reading he would say 'please sit down', and we knew we were in for a treat as he gave a short homily on the readings; without notes, just with profound knowledge and wisdom.

He brought alive what I had always found a dull part of the Sunday Eucharist then he encouraged us to say (think): 'because God loves us' after each phrase in the CREED. It makes a huge difference.

Thank you Bishop Alan

Jenny C

The whole family were really saddened by Bishop Alan's loss

Bishop Alan always treated and spoke with you as if you were an intellectual equal and would show you pictures and articles and books that interested him with such enthusiasm, and knowledge that you wanted to go and find out more for yourself. He would ask you opinion, and treat your ill formed thoughts as valid, and relevant.

Gabriel says how very kind and gentle he was. Bishop Alan knew ALL the children's names and importantly would remember who's child was who's when asking about them ! He took an interest in their development and life outside the Church, and would speak WITH them, encouraging them and building their confidence always interested in what they had to say.

Both Chris and my mother Barbara said that Bishop Alan would always make a point of speaking with them when they came to St Marks. Bishop Alan and Jean on the day they graduated from Oxford University took a bus and celebrated with a picnic in the meadows where I spent my childhood (and worse!) in my home town of Burford in the Cotswolds. I am pleased to have that connection with them.

My abiding memory of Bishop Alan is last year pre Christmas, when we were making bows together for the Christmas Wreaths to sell at the Fair. It was a lovely couple of hours spend in good company, and with a great deal of laughter.

Louise Kowalska

Alan took the Eucharist to Theodore ('Gift of God') in the nearby Care Home and I came as well at Alan's request. Theodore is a member of the Ukrainian Catholic Church and is glad to accept our Eucharist.

I called into the Care Home twice after Alan had died but Theodore seemed reluctant to come to St Mark's for the funeral. However, Robert, a care assistant, persuaded him to come away and succeeded in getting Theodore out of his room—and a promise of further expeditions.

A Red Letter Day!!

John Rostron

I have only little memories of Bishop Alan, in the Cornerstone Bookshop, quietly wandering around the shelves, with the occasional soft question and appreciative comment. And of course the glint in his eye of a true devotee of good books!

Amanda Wright

"He always took time to ask me how I was"

Amanda Muir

The Rt Rev'd Alan Smithson

In 2007 Bishop Alan Smithson moved to Musselburgh to be near one of his daughters in Portobello, and started attending St Mark's. He had already retired to Creetown in Galloway in 2002 where they had a holiday cottage. Very quickly he and his wife Jean became involved in all aspects of church life and any reservations that folk might have had about how to behave around a bishop were quickly dispelled. His gentle and modest manner, and the ability to be such a good listener, put us all at our ease. Until his sudden death on 17 June 2010 Bishop Alan was a vital part of the ministry team: visiting the sick; taking part in services; preaching and offering meditations in Holy Week; leading courses; joining in the book group; and offering support where needed. He made friends with the other Portobello clergy, acted as Chaplain to the Musselburgh Sea Cadets, and kept links with the Mission to Seafarers and the Focolare Movement. Alan was also one of the external moderators of Tisec and many of the students remember his quiet understanding.

Born and brought up in Bradford, Alan was always convinced that he would be a priest. He met his wife Jean while studying at Oxford and they were married just before he served his title at Christ Church, Skipton in his home diocese of Bradford. Alan's second curacy was at the University Church, Oxford where he was also appointed pastoral chaplain at Queen's. It quickly became clear that Alan crammed two lives into one – that of a priest and a parent – wholeheartedly.

In 1972 Alan became Chaplain at Reading University and the Smithsons opened their home to students of all faiths. Alan was always interested in working with young people and different denominations and faiths and this stayed throughout his ministry. Five years later the Bishop of Reading asked him to be Vicar of Bracknell, a new town, and in 1983 Alan was appointed Director of the Carlisle Diocesan Training Institute and Residentiary Canon of Carlisle Cathedral. This involved a lot of late night travelling and many challenges but he rose to the occasion with great charity and understanding. During this time Alan continued studying other faiths and made many friends among the Jewish and Muslim communities.

After a sabbatical in the USA in 1989 he was invited to be Bishop of Jarrow where he stayed until his retirement in 2001. Readers of the Church Times may remember the furore when Alan decided to read and study the Qur'an one Lent and he was hurt by some of the dreadful correspondence he received. But he remained convinced that the future of a global community would depend on all faiths finding a way of living together in peace and mutual respect. At his farewell service in Durham Cathedral, representatives of many other faiths offered their prayers and respect to him.

Among the tributes which have flooded in since his death, many have spoken of his wisdom, kindness and gentleness as well as his gift of being able to explain deep philosophical issues with such clarity. We will remember his love of poetry and music, his ability to 'see' people, his great gift of preaching and his love for all. For love was his meaning.

Ruth Innes
Printed in 'Inspires.'





WHAT WE CALL THE BEGINNING IS OFTEN THE END
AND TO MAKE AN END IS TO MAKE A BEGINNING.
THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM.

Taken from
LITTLE GIDDING
(No. 4 of 'Four Quartets')
T.S. Eliot

One of Bishop Alan's favourite poems.