

PETER OGILVIE MERLOTT CHITTY

8 April 1929 - 4 March 2018

FUNERAL HOMILY

Canon Andrew Neaum

Peter Chitty. Out of the ordinary. Unusual. Distinctive. A one off. Defying easy characterisation. Not the sort to tackle head-on. As one or two vicars found out.

This vicar is too canny to try that. Far wiser, he thinks, to contextualise, shade in the background, fill in the context, define him by what and who were round and about him like Penelope, for instance.

A good looking fellow though, was Peter, he didn't pick a lightweight piece of fluff to ask to marry him. He picked someone as capable, clever and strong-willed as himself. When pulling together, which appears to have been most of the time, what a team, what a team. They did wonders in and for this church.

When not pulling together.....? Sadly I was never around to see it. But it must have been exciting. I like to think that Penelope would be the victor, and Peter wise enough to rest content in defeat. But I wonder. His choice, though, of that slip of a 20 year old girl suggests discernment.

Then there are the four boys. Fine looking fellows. More than that though, fine too in character, achievement, marriage, family and offspring. To produce one such, is an achievement, four a triumph. It suggests a dad not altogether deficient both as genetic donor and role model.

Then there's the army. To the eye, in demeanour and bearing, surely a soldier of soldiers. To Sandhurst and the officers mess born, and yet, one suspects, not always quite perfectly fitting in. For I can't imagine that taking orders, deferring to bigwigs, being under authority, suffering fools gladly and playing altogether by the rules, came easily to him. Because one of his most attractive qualities was a certain quirky flippancy. An irreverent, almost subversive sense of fun. Of course he fitted in. He had to and enjoyed doing so, it seems. Partly, though, by not quite fitting in.

Then there's the Church and its music. He was a choir man. There is no better class of homo sapiens than a Church of England choir man. There's no more satisfying singing, than church choir singing. A performance every week. Not for kudos, not for praise, but to offer kudos and offer praise. And if faith falters, or doubts deepen, music and singing hold you there until faith and hope return.

But he was more than that, was he not? He was a lay reader and a preacher. A fine one, a clear one, a funny one. I've read some of his talks and sermonettes. He was. He was. A good researcher too. Witness he and Penelope's Guide to this church and his booklet: 'The Bishop of Botany Bay'.

He loved the Church. He loved this church. In his own trad, C of E way, he dearly loved his God. Love sometimes becomes excessive, leads to extremes. As with me too it sometimes leads to conflict. Peter for a time was banned from St John's. Now there's a thing! I love him for that. For I too have made an arse of myself by excessive zeal, immoderation and wild letter-writing. Sooner than prissy, milk and water platitudinarianism. Like Jesus of Nazareth, he was never, boring, boring, boring.

So, there's the context. There's the man and if that really is the man, even if only partially and faintly, I love and admire him.

As a good member of the church team, as a well loved member of the St John's family, he was duly anointed with oil and received his Church's last rites, in hospital, very shortly before he died. But I have a more lasting memory of him from the day before that. He was at home, on his bed by the window. Penelope, Diana and I were chatting away, attempting to include him as much as we could. He was watching and listening. Shortly before we left, he caught my eye, and smiled a smile that was ineffably, heart-breakingly sweet; for its undoubted genuineness and acknowledged and accepted vulnerability.

In that moment I was granted a glimpse of the real and deeply loving man. It had nothing to do with mere context. It was him. The essential person, about to meet his loving, all forgiving, all accepting, splendid Lord, whom he loved and I love to bits..... Good on him. Amen.