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'I don't think I've ever seen such desolation'

Robert Wright
Sub Dean of Westminster Abbey, Rector of St Margaret's Church, and Chaplain to the Speaker

I'm Chaplain to the Speaker, although I'm effectively chaplain to the House of Commons as well — indeed, Vicar of Parliament — both Houses. The statutory requirement is to say prayers every day at the beginning of business when the House is sitting. The prayers were set in 1660, and slightly changed when New Labour came into power in 1997. The prayer for the Queen was simplified, and the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who" instead of "Our Father, which"). But the key change was the central prayer for parliamentarians — which is a new prayer. And an additional prayer was added on the day after a member dies, after the death of John Smith.

It's a very active role: it's not just an honorary title. It's being a pastor to the 12,000 people who carry passes for the Houses of Parliament — like being a vicar: being there, being around, being available. I work in the Lords as well, and have a lot to do with peers through memorials, baptisms, and weddings. It's a large, central stage, but it's just people. . .

When I came up for my interview, a policeman asked: "Are you our new rector?" and I said, "I'll tell you in about 20 minutes." The policeman obviously expected to see me about, being around, being with people. That's the wonderful part of the job.

I see the Speaker every day when the House is sitting, and I've been standing alongside him through this difficult time. It has been a historic and momentous week — quite remarkable. As I came out of prayers on Monday, I don't think I've ever experienced such desolation and despair. I could feel it tangibly.

People are confused, worried . . . on many levels. They are worried about changes in Parliament, worried about the future of democracy, worried about the telephone calls from the *Telegraph*, checking their expenses, worried for other people.

It's not only members who are affected, but families as well. It's put enormous pressure on a lot of families. Some have said their children are being shouted at at school. Wives are not being spoken to in the street, husbands not spoken to at school gatherings.

The suggestion is that they are all cheats, and that's not true. Most MPs I know and work with are very hard-working people, deeply committed to their constituents, who go into Parliament for honourable reasons. Things have gone terribly wrong.

There are 25 journalists working all day, every day to find things out . . . and the system has put temptation in some people's way. I'm not

defending the system: it needs reform, doesn't it? But although it's an enormously privileged life, being an MP, they work very long hours and then go home to work in their constituencies over the weekend. I often have a meeting with an MP at 8.30 in the morning and find he's been at his desk for two hours already.

The day begins in the chapel in the Abbey with private prayer, morning prayer, and the eucharist. After 9/11, I found myself wondering "Gosh, what am I doing here?" and the answer is that all you are here for is to pray. People know those prayers are being said every day, and a lot of people have been saying this week: "You are praying for us, aren't you?" Yes, I am; yes, we are, in the Abbey.

There does need to be radical change. People need to be able to trust the system and members. Most people don't meet their MP, do they? So it's difficult to build up that trust. That's why it's such a tragic situation — desperate, not only for Parliament and its future, but the country. And others — they look to the Mother of Parliaments and see the awful mess we're in. . .

But, as Christians, we have to remember not to judge, don't we? We have to look at our own integrity — ordinary men and women like you and me.

I've been running round like a scalded cat. I'm Canon in Residence at the Abbey: we are in residence one month at a time, three months a year, to be generally available for whatever's on, and to read the lessons at morning and evening prayer. And I've been trying to focus on Parliament and trying to be there. And I've also done some television work for the launch of this enormous appeal for St Margaret's. We're trying to raise £2 million.

Parliament paid the equivalent of £1 million over 20 years for repairs for St Margaret's in the 18th century. It's the same repair work to the towers and roofs that we're doing now; so I hope MPs and peers will contribute. Under the 1972 Act, the Abbey was required by law to keep St Margaret's open for such use as Parliament requires, but didn't allow for any funding from Parliament. The regular maintenance has been done by the Abbey, and £300,000-worth of work on the tower, but we still need a massive amount for these repairs to the roofs, down pipes, pinnacles on the tower, and stonework.

We're also hoping to turn one of the rooms in the porches into a room for the Sunday school and crèche, because we have no room for them at the moment. There are fewer than 50 parishioners, but we have quite a number of people who come faithfully from all over London; and many young couples whom we marry come, and bring their children.

The Westminster Village, they call it, don't they? If I walk across the road, I bump into people you see every night on television. It's a great mixture of Church, State, and society in an idyllic situation.

Shopping was difficult until Sainsbury's opened a new shop in Pimlico — it was a big event when that opened. But it's a quarter of mile to bring the shopping home: it's a long walk with a trolley.

The Sub Dean is the senior canon when the Dean is not present; so I represent the Dean sometimes, and, most significantly, when there isn't a Dean.

I do miss the sense of being part of a diocese, which was always fun.



A lot of encounters are just glancing encounters. In Parliament, I might have a deep conversation with someone one day, and the next day they rush by because they are so busy. And then perhaps I don't see them again for three months.

My father was a priest, and my son is a vicar in Peckham. From about the age of nine, I thought God was asking me to do this, and though I tried a number of other things, it didn't seem quite right; so I was one of those who went straight through into ordination. It was quite a shock when the letter came from Downing Street inviting me to this post. I had always imagined that I'd be a parish priest.

I was enormously influenced by Christopher Pepys, Bishop of Buckingham, who ordained me

deacon in 1973, but who died before I was priested. He was such fun, and made the gospel seem fun — full of happiness and joy. I can see him now, laughing his head off.

I do remember a sermon from my Vicar in Amersham, who tried very hard to be relevant. He was preaching about the Holy Spirit and suddenly disappeared behind the altar, where he started his lawnmower in clouds of blue smoke. It was very funny — though I don't think it taught me much about the Holy Spirit.

I try to make sense of things through painting. I'm an abstract artist. I've had three exhibitions, and I'm working towards the next one. One will be auctioned for the St Margaret's appeal.

MORE gadding. I have longed for ages to see my friend Patrick Wildgust, the curator of Shandy Hall in faraway Yorkshire. And now I am there, alongside other devotees of Laurence Sterne, Perpetual Curate of Coxwold and author of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*. The latter title suits me admirably.

Shandy Hall is so exactly as I imagined it that it is like running into Emily Brontë on the moor. Except that, as Haworth is the very spirit of *Wuthering Heights*, so Shandy Hall is still so as the Revd Laurence Sterne left it in the 1760s that I expected to find him weeding. Instead, Patrick gallops out to see me in.

A young man plays a viola da gamba in the panelled parlour. Swallows zoom in and out of the stable. Purple clouds hang over Byland Abbey. Polished, worn stairs take me to my room, the same stairs that Sterne climbed, the same rail that prevented him from sliding down.

I unpack my clean shirt and my sermon, which is the one on the Walking Christ which I take around with me, adding this and that. The accounts of Sterne's preaching do not agree. Some biographers say that half the congregation left the minute he began to speak; others say that at Coxwold one could not get a seat. Certainly, his sermons broke through what was expected. One on the Prodigal Son advocated the advantages of foreign travel.

In the morning, the Shandy Hall party walked the few steps to St Michael's, which is very beautiful and which only recently received Sterne's body plus his London tombstone.

Many literary priests — Robert Herrick was one — resented being stuck in their rural livings, but



word from Wormingford

Ronald Blythe takes a sentimental journey to the village of Coxwold

Sterne loved his. Yorkshire seems to have accepted his notoriety with ease. He was the master of sentiment, for whom the raffish and the delicate, or the humane, if you like, not to mention a delight in wit, could be put on the page. Even in the notes for the Sunday sermon.

I borrowed the curate's cassock, and preached from Laurence Sterne's triple-decker pulpit. The May sun glistened through the medieval glass. We had listened to my favourite Isaiah being perfectly read, and had sung the St Francis hymn. Ian, the young Vicar, had found some fine walking prayers. Folk had arrived from far and wide.

Outside, the steep churchyard ran down to a stream. There was a big dandelion square, containing a soldier who had charged in the Light Brigade. His grave, in all the

I'm influenced by the Russian Constructivists, like Rodchenko (there's an exhibition at Tate Modern at the moment which is very good), and Rothko and Ben Nicholson and Terry Frost. Those are my heroes.

I'm the governor of an inner-city school, and see what life is like for many people. I do get angry about extremes of wealth.

I had one of those big birthdays recently, and my wife and I took the family out for lunch: my son and daughter, their wife, husband, and our new grandson. It was a wonderfully happy time.

We have quite a link with Commonwealth countries, and I remember one of the High Commissioners telling me that I should always eat Fairtrade bananas — preferably from the Windward Islands.

I'm a Companion of the Society of the Precious Blood at Burnham. It's been very important to me ever since I was a little boy. I don't get there as often as I used to, but, although the Sisters' 14th-century building is between Heathrow, the M4, and the mainline railway, the skin between heaven and earth is very thin there.

That time in St Faith's chapel in the morning saying the Jesus Prayer — that is the heart of what I am and who I am.

I'd like to be locked in St Margaret's with either Thomas Merton or Mark Rothko. Actually, I'd like to be very greedy and have them both, so we could have a conversation.

Canon Robert Wright was talking to Terence Handley MacMath.

wide churchyard, lay unmarked. Sterne's was sideways on by the south wall, and could not have been more wryly accounted for had he himself written it.

He died from consumption in a room above a silk-bag shop in Old Bond Street in 1768. He was 55. He was buried in St George's new burial ground, and promptly dug up by resurrection men and sold to the medical school in Cambridge, where it was recognised by a famous physician and returned to Paddington for reburial.

There, two larky freemasons erected a tombstone that began, "Alas, poor Yorick". On 4 June 1969, Sterne's body was once again exhumed, because a developer wished to build a block of flats where he lay, and was returned to his loved Coxwold. Hilarious, unique in literature, he had once written: "I am positive I have a soul: nor can all the books with which materialists have pestered the world ever convince me of the contrary."

That evening, Patrick, Paul the artist, and the viola da gamba boy and I drove to Byland Abbey in the rain.

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