

**An address at the funeral of Johanna Raffan, RIP, 28th June 2021,
The Revd. Sally Lynch, St. Luke's Church, Maidenhead**

The interviewees for the post of vicar of this church a little over ten years ago, were subjected to the usual variety of tasks and chats. I remember very clearly sitting in a circle in the chapel with half a dozen key church members. It was in that very first encounter that I recognised that the lady with the slightly unusual name was a deeply spiritual person.

Clearly since then I got to know Johanna – and her story too.

Gerda has helped to fill in the key details of her full, rich and blessed life.

Johanna desired to become a nun in her teens while she was at school. She was persuaded not to, and she met Sandy very shortly afterwards. They both fell head over heels in love with each other and enjoyed very nearly fifty years of happy, devoted marriage.

Johanna thrived both professionally and personally. She became a Headteacher, and many people have paid tribute to her as their teacher, or as dedicated teacher of their child. I had an email from one adult, for example, who wrote: *An example of her dedication was when I failed my 11 plus exam and was very upset as I knew I'd be split up from my best friends. She then came around to my house that day for a chat to make me feel better. Mrs Raffan was a true example of the perfect teacher. Tough when needed and giving great support at times of adversity.*

She loved her work, and she was innovative in her approach to self-directed learning, and comfortable and carpeted classrooms. Many of us know that later in her career she diversified into providing structure and guidelines for Gifted Children and she was a founder member of NACE - The National Association of Able Children .

Here she excelled and she lectured far and wide on how this precious resource of clever brains needs protecting, supporting and encouraging. Johanna taught the teachers in Denmark, USA , Spain, Norway (of course!) and elsewhere. She was rewarded for this work in 2013, by being awarded the MBE.

Alongside her professional life, Johanna was committed to Sandy's Masonry, but her own huge commitment was to Soroptimism. Soroptimism seeks to improve the lot of women and girls – around the world and through this amazing movement Johanna has made a difference to many lives. One particular project the Kori Project in Sierra Leone was particularly close to her heart, where the Sandy Raffan Library and its classrooms thrive. She has revelled in the last year in her presidency of SIGBI, frustrated at not being able to travel but instead able to attend local, meetings literally all over the world.

Johanna worked hard in public service, but took also literally Jesus' promise and she enjoyed life in all its fulness too. She was a great wine buff, there was never any duff wine when Johanna was ordering. A few years ago, she and another church member took part in 'Desert Island Hymns and Readings'. Her companion that evening wrote to Gerda: We each shared our faith journeys alongside our favourite hymns and readings. It was a real privilege to hear Johanna's story and to be her fellow castaway, especially with her luxury item of an endless supply of red wine!

And I think we are hearing all of those hymns again today.

Johanna was also a passionate traveller she continued to enjoy her time share in Gran Canaria after Sandy died. She also joined us on three pilgrimages to the Holy Land, which I know were a source of deep joy and spiritual nourishment.

Back to that spiritual depth.

After Sandy died Johanna spent time in contemplation and she told me, and I think others, I heard God saying to me, 'I want you back'. And He got her back – back to that original desire in many ways, and yet now with a whole lifetime of experience – of joys and sorrows – the whole mess of life into which the incarnate Jesus was born, she was able to bring to her new/old vocation.

As Martha, she had served (and still did) but Mary came to the fore as Johanna sat at the feet of her Lord- and listened. She drew strength from prayer and retreat. The story of Martha and Mary was one that resonated strongly with Johanna and those of us who were with her – on more than one occasion - will treasure her reading of that story in the very place where it happened 2000 years ago.

Johanna explored the religious life and took first a vow to the Single Consecrated Life - for which God's wedding ring is the altar today - and then become one of the first members of the Society of the Resurrection, based at Mirfield, which she called her spiritual home. The great joy she had always had in her faith, blossomed into a mature and fulfilling life committed to God in a radical new way.

That deep faith is what inspired and encouraged her, and I am quite sure comforted and supported her in her unexpected dying. She knew who she was, whose she was and where she was going.

Johanna chose all the readings and the music that we have used in our two services today. She had given careful thought to what would express her best – her life and her faith.

Johanna knew that God loved her - just as she was – that he had called her by name and redeemed her. One of her favourite contemporary worship songs is based on the first reading that we heard today: Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you. We played it to her as she lay in hospital and hospice – and the beautiful final verse sums up her faith so eloquently – you are mine, O my child, I am your Father, and I love you with a perfect love. Johanna knew that deep inside her.

And we can know that too. Which is why she asked for no black to be worn – in her words – in celebration for a wonderful life. We wrestle with that – we loved, we love her, we mourn her and we miss her – but she speaks to us through the words of the second reading – she is already experiencing that new heaven and new earth, where there is no more death or crying or pain. Johanna is with God – all is well. When I ran out of words in the little time that I was able to spend with her towards the end – or perhaps I should call it the beginning – I found that all I could do was to quote mother Julian of Norwich: all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

All is well for Johanna, because she accepted Jesus' offer of life and she drank deeply, daily from the spring of water that he offered. For Johanna, a part of that regular sustaining from God involved the sacrament of Holy Communion. I am so glad that we were able to find a way of sharing the sacrament with her in her last days – feeding on Jesus for strength. And that is what she wants for us as we are gathered around God's table today. Perhaps not quite as we would wish due to the pandemic, but we still join together in this act of remembrance -anamnesis.

Bishop Richard Holloway writes that the Eucharist is not about Jesus, it is Jesus himself, come to us in bread and wine. Jesus who wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, knows how we weep for our sister Johanna, and he comes to each of us today and says, all will be well. Do not be afraid. I love you with a perfect love. I sense that that is what Johanna wants to say to us today: All is well. I am fine. And you can be too. Just trust 'Him'.

And so we come today to thank God for our sister, friend, companion on the way, Johanna. To commend her to his care – even though she is already there! To look to God for comfort and perhaps even to learn from Johanna, to seek to emulate her faith. And although we wanted more of it, to celebrate a wonderful life.

Gerda writes this:

'All who met Johanna know she was a brilliant raconteur and excellent company. She was interested in people and their trajectories.....the presence of so many adult Godchildren here today is testament to this .

She made friends and kept them all her life, like her lovely parents, she loved parties and cooking for people .

We will all remember her for her generous hospitality, her sense of well-being and her extreme happiness, her pleasure in her garden, her contentment with life and the lovely way she had with everyone , that made each and every one of us feel special'.

Today we thank God that each of us shared a little bit of Johanna.

May she rest in peace – and rise in glory. Amen