

PETER BLACKBURN

Priest

*Addresses given at his Funeral Mass
Wednesday, 21 February 2018
Christ Church, Hampstead*

Marion McLeod (Read by Robert Golden)

My mother was a War widow at the end of the War. We went to live with her sister, Alice and husband Jim Blackburn in the Sydney suburb of Maroubra. Peter was a baby and we all lived at Maroubra until the Blackburns moved to Caringbah in the Sutherland Shire where Uncle Jim started building houses. My mother, Jean, found a flat in Maroubra and I lived there until my marriage in 1955.

Peter went to Caringbah Primary School, then on to Woolooware High School. He never pursued any sporting activity but he enjoyed his academic studies. Later he went to Sydney University to study for an Arts degree and, on graduation, went to England to study Theology at Leeds University. On graduation, I believe he went to Felixstowe.

Whenever we visited London, we always caught up with him for lunch or dinner. He would visit us while staying in Balmain with his friend Robert. I spoke to Peter only a few weeks before he passed away. I had not had a card at Christmas and called him. He sounded quite ill but assured me he was recovering. I was shocked to learn of his passing and always enjoyed his company whether in London or Sydney.

Peter was the most entertaining dinner guest, with wonderful stories of his travels and interesting friends. I shall miss him.

Robert Tunbridge (Read by Robert Golden)

Peter's cousin, Marion, outlined Peter's family background. He grew up near two of Sydney's famous beaches and he never lost his love of swimming, be it pool, ocean or, on later visits to Sydney, beautiful rock pools with waves occasionally sweeping over them.

He came from a close and loving family and although, in his own caustic way, he would send up his family and himself, he remained devoted to them throughout their lives and regretted bitterly that he missed the passing of his father. They, of course, were devoted to him and after she was widowed, Alice Blackburn would make an annual pilgrimage to wherever Peter was stationed.

I first met Peter in 1965 when we were students. We were studying for an Arts degree and both of us had recently discovered Christ Church, St Lawrence, Sydney's premier Anglo-Catholic church in what has always been an evangelical diocese. Peter would relate stories of his home parish, St Andrew's, Cronulla. It was neo-Byzantine on the outside and Alice Blackburn would exclaim (Edna style), "How gorgeous the flowers are." Peter's retort, "Mother, it is more floral than choral Eucharist."

For one year, Peter and I ran the University's Anglican Society, with Peter as President. It was thriving and that circle of friends remained close to, or in touch with Peter throughout his life. That was one of Peter's great characteristics: a tremendous capacity for friendship and a loyalty to his closest and dearest friends from a very wide circle.

Peter enrolled at St Paul's College at the University to study Law. He loved College life, he loved his books, chintz furniture and drinks parties. He carried these attributes into his working life. People, whether they be friends or parishioners, responded enthusiastically. He was gregarious, a very good cook and a generous host.

In 1969 Peter decided that Law was not for him and left Australia to follow his vocation and study theology through Mirfield. Peter and his family were unreconstructed

Anglophiles. He regretted the rising Australian nationalism. He much preferred that “British Subject” be inscribed on our passports. For Peter, he was always British. He remained attached to Australia all his life. Whilst Vicar of Burythorpe in Yorkshire, he swapped Livings with a priest in Sydney from St Peter’s, Cremorne. Peter was a great success while there, inviting parishioners for drinks and socialising with them. He had a special rapport with the elderly, and he loved animals, especially dogs. He was less impressed when the Cremorne priest changed the altar at Burythorpe to face the people. A conservative in all things to his last breath, Peter knew what he believed and stood for, even if it made him appear eccentric or even anachronistic.

Peter was an avid reader, reading widely in everything from politics and literature to film and architecture. And he loved music, especially Handel. He had a special passion for gardening and as his health started to deteriorate in recent years, he was extremely reluctant to sell his “troglydyte” cottage in France. He would go there each summer and immerse himself in the garden: weeding, planting, rejoicing in the new life of spring and the other seasonal changes.

He was ordained on St Peter’s Day at Bury St Edmunds and his first curacy was with Canon Tidy, the Vicar of Felixstowe. The Canon was a priest whom Peter revered, and he became Peter’s model of a faithful priest in the High Church tradition. Later at St Peter’s, Bournemouth, Peter loved the churchmanship and the urbane nature of the congregation and continued his round of making life-long friends.

After Bournemouth,¹ Peter accepted a posting to take charge of Christ Church, Naples. He remained in the diocese of Gibraltar (now Europe) for the rest of his ministry. He was Chaplain to the NATO forces, and the Americans loved him and opened up their houses and pools to him. He would often house-sit, (especially where there was a garden and pool), during the hot Neapolitan summer. He soon mastered Italian and was looked after by his housekeeper, Rosa. His main battle was domestic; with a neighbour who insisted on feeding the stray cats with bowls of pasta, mostly placed on the steps leading to Peter’s Vicarage. The cardinal in Naples took Peter under his wing and he would join with the clergy in renewing his priestly and baptismal vows each year. Peter equally loved his time in Portugal, stationed in the Algarve. He would celebrate the Eucharist in various Catholic churches with their gold altars dating from the glory days of Portugal’s Empire. Finally, he acted as locum each year for two months in Genoa, including sadly last October where the parishioners were concerned for his health. On one occasion in Genoa Peter met Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVIth, “A saint,” said Peter.

Peter loved the Anglican Church, the 1662 Prayer Book and he would always describe himself as `Prayer Book Catholic and, if pushed, would probably admit to certain protestant ideas, no doubt emanating from his Cronulla background. While his personality was warm, he could be opinionated and uncompromising but underneath he was kind hearted and could show great compassion. He will be greatly missed by his very wide circle of friends and parishioners.

Andrew Gordon-Lennox

Assembled here, as well as the congregation of Christ Church Hampstead, are but some of those who knew Peter Blackburn in England, Naples, Bari, the Algarve, and of course more recently in London. Sadly we are not joined today (as far as I know) by those from Australia, the country of his birth, or from the parishes in Yorkshire, Felixstowe or Bournemouth where he studied for the priesthood and served as Curate or Rector before his time in Europe; neither from his Parish in the Algarve nor the Parish in Genoa, which he covered as a Locum for several years, the final time being last Autumn. I am sure that if they

¹ After Bournemouth Fr Peter was Rector, Burythorpe, Acklam and Leavening with Weston in Yorkshire before going to Naples.

were with us they would share our sadness, smiling as they recall their individual memories of a much loved Priest and friend.

I first met Peter in Naples in 1985 when he arrived to take over the Chaplaincy, and with the dedicated help of those perhaps best described as the Anglo-Italian permanent community he soon found his feet. Much credit for this must go to Michael and Bambi Rae. As permanent generational residents in Naples, the Raes saw us all come and go, and without their support Peter always said that his initial few months would have been very difficult. I was merely stationed there as one of the Royal Navy's contributions to NATO, but it was us transient UK/US visitors to Naples, resident there for periods of about three years at a time, who made up the bulk of the congregation of Christ's Church Naples. I became Peter's UK Churchwarden, and along with my US colleague remember noticing how quickly he fitted into the very different, exciting, environment in that quite amazing city. As Chaplain, Peter challenged all our faiths, as well as being an inspiring preacher. He also quickly identified his wider role in the Community, not just the UK/NATO Anglicans, or our US Baptist colleagues, but spreading easily outwards to those in the community who could, at best, be described as not regular churchgoers. As the chairman of the British Forces School PTA, I was delighted by the way that he re-established the scriptures, which had slipped a bit in the interregnum, into their curriculum. He was excellent with the children. I am absolutely sure one or two of the younger ones were quite convinced that he was God!

Of all of us, Maud and Michael Logan probably got to know him best, she sets the scene of Peter in Naples for us in the form of a letter to him:

"Dear Father Peter, or I should say Brother Peter, for that is how I thought of you. A tall, slightly over-sized, gentle and wise brother, I thought of you as part of our family for so many years. I think you thought so too. Thirty years and more ... since we all started our sunny, happy and, looking back, carefree time together in La Bella Napoli. Warm air, blue skies. Sunday morning worship in Naples' Christ Church. Your sermons were gentle, clear and thought provoking. The church service followed by friendly get-togethers in the courtyard behind the church, surrounded by exotic vegetation, tables with wine and coffee below the balcony of your small vicarage apartment. Warm air, blue skies, sounds of happy chats and laughter. Thank you Peter for our time with you at Christ Church, where our close friendship began."

Jane Haughton's experience sums up so well the way he welcomed new arrivals to the community:

"The thing about Peter which stands out was his incredible friendship and kindness, first to me, and later to my family. He wasn't just the vicar at the church but a friend and a confidante. I arrived in Napoli not knowing anyone - found my way to the English Church and immediately became friends with Peter, who was so warm-hearted, jovial and friendly that before I knew it I was stepping into the role of reluctant organist and as an even more ill-equipped choir mistress. I took on the roles willingly for I think about three years, mainly because I liked Peter so much and we worked so well together.

I remember once asking him if he would lend me some 200,000 Lire (c. £100) so I could put down a deposit on a piano I wanted to rent. Without hesitation he lent it to me. Later, he also generously lent us his lovely vicarage flat so my parents had somewhere comfortable and central to stay when they came to visit and I think he wined and dined them in some style too.

I remember with great affection the pot-luck Sunday lunches, one especially on an Easter Sunday when we had delicious Paschal roast lamb, at least twenty-five of us sitting down at a long trestle table along the side of the church in the warm Spring weather. I truly felt the real meaning of Easter and the Church family while we were all eating together that Easter Day".

As part of the Naples parish, Peter also had in his care a small community of English Anglicans in Bari, for the most part married to Italians or English lecturers at Bari University. They found him particularly comforting, as Lindsay Renzulli writes:

“He drove his tiny car regularly once a month over the Apennines to the other side of Italy to give us Holy Communion. As there was no church available the services were held in various homes of the community with the spiritual always followed by a convivial meal when we all had the chance to talk to him and to one another. His visits provided a kind of safety valve for these people, who were not necessarily expats who had chosen to retire to Puglia, but mostly men and women who had come to work, or landed up there by chance, married an Italian and settled down to raise an Anglo-Italian family. Peter was a good listener, a wise counsellor, and a gentle consoler when one of our number died. He loved our efforts to try to make English gardens with plants from home combined with the native flowers and shrubs. He came back to visit us over the years, when he was taking locums in Italy, and remained a faithful friend ever since. He will be missed by so many.”

Peter continued to serve the Christ Church and wider English Community in many ways for nearly ten years. Ian Mackenzie and his family knew him well:

“Peter was one of our very best friends in Napoli. Apart from mixing the best cocktails and preparing and cooking the most exquisite of very long Sunday lunches after church, he also gave the blessing at our daughter Polly’s wedding in the courtyard of our house in Umbria, which Peter likened to a Zefferelli film, and also officiated at our other daughter Kirste’s wedding in the medieval Chiesa di Santo Stefano in Assisi leading the passeggiata through the streets of the Town after the ceremony. As a family we all have wonderful, wonderful memories of a very special person.”

After Naples, Peter was appointed to the chaplaincy in the Algarve, which he always said he enjoyed very much, and I regret not having been more successful in contacting them. He retired from the holy ministry rather earlier than many of us expected, but the magic of Italy had captured him, so he continued to carry out locums and visit friends in Italy until his final visit to Genoa last autumn. Initially he had retired to France, buying a tiny cottage near Saumur on the south bank of the Loire. A beautiful spot, with the caves and cliffs at his back, looking down onto the River far below. Those who visited were made very welcome, but guests soon learnt that tiny cottage meant exactly that, and the best idea was to put up in the nearby B&B. Many tours of Chateaux and Vineyards, as well as picnics and good lunches among the Sunflowers were to follow, as Peter, no doubt inspired by the expats of Bari, tried to create an English “Jardin sur Loire” with mixed success. He was often in England, and as we live near Portsmouth Ferry terminal, he would stay on his way to and from France; also finding time to assist in the weddings of both our sons, whom he had first met as 7 and 5 year olds in Naples.

Peter was so delighted when the opportunity to join the community here in Christ Church Hampstead arose. He said it gave him wonderful stability in the UK and in a way closed the loop – from Christ Church Naples to Christ Church Hampstead – and he told me on several occasions how much he felt at home here in every way.

I am sure all his visiting friends here today would want to thank Canon Paul, his team and this congregation for the welcome you offered, and the spiritual and secular companionship and satisfaction you provided to him in recent years.

Peter was, of course, much inspired by the cultural attractions of London, and had friends here with whom he could enjoy them, in particular his long term friend Adrian, as well as the Logans, so I continue to quote from Maud’s open letter to him:

“Since then, Peter, in London, although living some distance apart made meetings less frequent than we wished, to see you was always on the agenda. You made the effort with multiple changes of buses to visit us in our home and you know how much I enjoyed our days together visiting art of all kinds. To walk round in a large old gallery quietly discussing the art on show with you always gave the deepest pleasure. You, so knowledgeable, and with a never failing memory, were always open to new thoughts and theories. Thank you for those times. When time and distance did not allow a meeting, our sometimes rather lengthy telephone conversations also gave such pleasure. You always asked after the family and anything of concern your thoughtful but also common sense comments gave perspective and

helped put things right. To our young you were always Father Peter and always will be so. We shall all greatly miss you, and when I get to Scotland I shall have to tell Sammy the seal that you now are calling him from up above. The Easter palm crosses have been saved from each year you sent them and they will be on show this Easter as always. So, you see, you are always with us, one way or other.

My family, and all those who were fortunate to have your company during your wanderings through life, join me to thank you Brother Peter for the happy times together, for your wisdom and kindness, and for all those years of friendship.”

Well, here we all are, united in sorrow for the loss of Peter. He has left behind so many people who loved him dearly. As I quoted from Ian Mackenzie earlier: “We all do indeed all have wonderful, wonderful memories of a very special person”.

Thank you Peter, and Goodbye.

Julia Elton

Peter was one of my oldest friends. We met in the early 1970s when I was reading music and Icelandic at Leeds University and he was studying for the priesthood at Mirfield. We were part of a close-knit group of friends interested in architecture and music and we all did quite a lot of skiving off in pursuit of these interests. He managed to persuade Father Benedict Green to allow him to hear Rita Hunter singing Brunnhilde in Leeds, writing to our friend, Stuart, “What a delicious idea to pretend that Leeds is Glyndebourne ... I have just seen the Acting-Principal (Benedict) who has reluctantly given me permission to go (or did he just enjoy making gracious concessions?). I guess the performance must start fairly early – running through Leeds in dinner jackets at 4.30 in the afternoon we may be mistaken for homeward-bound waiters from the lunchtime shift.”

In between Bible exegesis, singing and elocution lessons and other aspects of clerical training, he even attended a course at the evangelical Oak Hill College in Southgate from which he wrote, “Have been to the theatre & several High Masses so I have undone the protestant conversion course (Grade 1) that this address implies”. He did, of course, remain a staunch High Churchman all his life.

He also did pastoral visits to what he described as “antique Yorkshire ladies in an overheated rest home.” All his life he enjoyed the company of older women, writing in the same letter, “I’m having an Australian friend to stay over the weekend, a super old lady of advanced Anglo-Catholic tendencies, with the most hysterically cultivated voice. Actually, she was born in Bradford and sat on the knee of Delius as a girl there.”

He was ordained priest at St. Edmundsbury Cathedral in 1973 and went on to serve as curate in Felixstowe and then Bournemouth before taking on a parish of his own at Burythorpe in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Although he was a successful parish priest, he really came into his own when he was appointed Anglican Chaplain in Naples in 1991. He was much loved by his ex-pat Anglican parishioners, as I discovered for myself when I dropped his name during a visit to the Anglican Church in Palermo. There were several people there who knew him well from Naples and when they understood that I was an old friend of his I was treated like royalty. It has always seemed to me that he found his true role in ministering to those Anglicans who felt side-lined by the Church of England in its evangelical rush to populism and its current ethos of one size fits all.

He adored being in Europe, becoming fluent in Italian and pursuing his scholarly interests into Italian culture with zeal. His knowledge of its architecture, painting and music was beyond impressive. Even when he was appointed Chaplain to the Algarve in Portugal he maintained his Italian links via his role as locum to the Anglican parish in Genoa.

And he could get on with anyone. He accepted the invitation I rather nervously proffered to spend a few days in the Vendée with my sister and her two rather rambunctious children. Since he didn’t seem to me someone who was a natural with small children, I laid on a programme of places to visit in order to protect him. How wrong I was! The places went

unvisited because he enormously enjoyed their company and flung himself into their pursuits, going swimming and body surfing with them. They became deeply attached to him and over the years he often went back to see them and my sister.

He had a tremendous sense of fun and style coupled with a gorgeous, biting, waspish wit, though his friends sometimes found themselves on the receiving end of it. He once watched my sister talking to someone she particularly disliked, later remarking acidly that she resembled nothing so much as the Queen of Hungary receiving a leper. He specialised in creating cocktails, strong and generous ones, undiluted by anything as feeble as fruit juice, referred to by his friends as Peter's arse-kicking cocktails. I remember in particular the one he created in 1981 for the Royal Wedding. He called it 'The Cartland' and made it with blue curacao, the colour of Barbara Cartland's hair. She, as you will remember, was Princess Diana's step-grandmother. He loved good food and even when alone always cooked himself a meal from scratch, scorning instant microwaved food. When we dined out in a restaurant he felt that it was impossibly vulgar to order wine by the glass, insisting on a bottle or nothing. I'm afraid this is a habit that none of his friends have been able to shake off.

But he also had an austere, frugal side. He never threw out his clothes. His mother taught him to sew and he always darned his socks and repaired his shirts. This habit spilled over into a talent for needlework and wherever he lived there were always cushions with ecclesiastical or Victorian patterns whose covers he had worked. He loved good fabrics and some thirty years ago brought back from Nepal yards of wonderful material embroidered in pink and yellow, the last remnants of which adorn his Hampstead flat.

His tall and statuesque figure with its shock of dark gold hair gave him great presence, rather enhanced than otherwise by that incongruously high voice with its soft Australian accent. That voice occasionally had its drawbacks. He once got into a taxi in the dark, swathed in a black clerical cloak and when he had given directions, the taxi driver replied, "Certainly Madam." Peter was not amused.

I realised when I started writing this that I know very little of Peter's Australian background. Our friendship sprang, like Athena, fully armed from the head of Zeus, with no looking back. And he was a marvellous friend, wise, perceptive and thoughtful. Months would go by between our meetings but it didn't matter much because we always picked up where we had left off. When I was in a panic of doubt about whether or not to get together with my now late husband, I rang Peter and wept down the telephone. As I paused to wipe my eyes he said, very quietly, "Take love where it falls." I followed his advice and had a blissfully happy marriage.

Thank you Peter for being such a shining thread in my life. You were a truly good man.

Canon Paul Conrad

I cannot quite remember when I first met Peter but I got to know him well in 2004. I spent the summer in France that year with a friend who had just come out of the army and who had known Peter from his days in Bournemouth. We stayed for a day or two at Parthenay and visited Peter. Later he came to stay with us in the extremely grand but, in those days, very shabby chateau in Burgundy which had been leant to me by a friend. He was in his element.

Four or five years later a heart attack brought to an end Peter's nomadic life, spent in the summer months in France and in the winter, when his troglodyte dwelling was too cold and damp, caring for the English Church in Genoa. He needed to come to England and to put himself in the care of the NHS. As good fortune would have it there was a vacancy in one of the Almshouses here in Hampstead Square.

And so Peter came. Although he has struggled with ill health in recent years, I think he was happy here. What I am certain of is that he became a much loved member of our Christ Church community.

In the streams of consciousness which passed as Peter's sermons you were as like to hear a description of the pleasures of eating brown bread ice cream under a Neapolitan fig tree or about which plants and flowers has flourished particularly well that spring in his French garden as anything. But if you listened carefully, and we usually did, it all being rather compelling stuff, there would emerge a message, often a piece of gentle and sensible advice about living the Christian life.

There was an attractive quality about Peter, humility might be too strong a way of describing it, self-deprecating serves better.

He used to like to preach here at Petertide - the anniversary of his ordination and the occasion of his Name Day giving the time much significance for him. I recall one of those sermons well. It was illustrated by an account of the rebuilding of the Parish Church in Saumur, not far from his French home, after the ravages of the Wars of Religion. Saumur had been a Huguenot centre. As an act of Catholic assertion a new façade was built and inscribed with the words "Hoc est post fortior." "After the fall/lapse stronger." It was upon the failings and weaknesses of St Peter and upon their ultimately strengthening effects that Peter chose to preach. "How blessed are those who know their need of God."

I recall going into the vestry here one Sunday morning and finding Peter sitting and weeping - he was, it has to be said, much blessed with the gift of tears, a beautifully sung aria by Handel or the recollection of a beloved but deceased friend triggering this. I said to him, "Peter, whatever is the matter?" He said, "Today is the fortieth anniversary of my saying Mass for the first time." "But Peter," I said, "that is wonderful, surely we should celebrate." No," he said, "I have been such a bad priest."

Peter was not a bad priest and he was a good and loyal and entertaining friend.

In searching for documents after Peter's death, I came across his mother's will. She made her bequests to, "My dearest son who brought love and happiness into his father's and my life." One might add, "And into the lives of his many friends."

We shall miss him so very much.