

Remembering Fiona



Sadly, Fiona died in September 2004 when she was only 48, leaving her husband Tim and two teenage children. They are an interchurch family, Tim being a Roman Catholic and Fiona an Anglican, married for nearly twenty years. Tim spoke about Fiona at her funeral, which took place in her Anglican church, following Mass the previous evening at the Catholic church, where her body was received before being taken to the Anglican church for a vigil service. He also spoke about her at the memorial Mass celebrated by a local group of interchurch families in another area, where in earlier years Tim and Fiona had been group secretaries. What follows is taken from what Tim said on these occasions, as he reflected on the twenty years of their interchurch family life.

At the funeral

There is so much I would like to say about Fiona but I wanted to focus on just two things about her life and ours, which I believe are important to share.

Firstly, as a Catholic married to an Anglican our marriage was founded from the start on a great desire for unity. Strong in our own denominational standing we nevertheless were drawn to each other. It didn't take up every thinking moment but it was there in the background throughout our marriage.

We tried to live unity

Our love for each other overcame all the challenges put in our way by the churches and in fact we quickly recognised the opportunities that being an interchurch family promised. We have tried to live unity rather than intellectualise it.

Today is an example – what privilege for us as a family to have members of two church communities celebrating Fiona's life together.

Mutual love and equality

What happened yesterday evening at the Church of the Assumption when our two communities came together around the Lord's Table on terms of mutual love and equality was what we prayed and lived our lives for.

If churches took the risk

We felt our lives mirrored what unity should be about – two individuals accepting each other for what we were for better or worse. We certainly disagreed over many things but we recognised that in the key things we felt the same. If only the churches could take the risk that each married person takes.

Real spiritual joy

Our lives (Fiona, Jonathan, Katie and I) have been enriched by our experience of belonging to two churches, and the services yesterday and today, though for the saddest reasons are sources of real joy, I mean spiritual joy. I know Fiona would have wanted such unity.

We are so pleased that Fr Brian, my Catholic parish priest, is here today to share in the funeral service. He has provided inspired pastoral support to us. Fiona loved Brian and only three weeks ago they were engaged in deep theological debate, sitting in the sunshine overlooking the sea at the Parish Picnic.

The second matter that I want to share about Fiona is closely linked to the first. Fiona was a woman of faith and this was the driving force of her life.

A penitent Catholic

I'm here today as a penitent Catholic because when I first knew Fiona I assumed that by being a Catholic I somehow had a superior relationship with God. I rapidly discovered that that I had met someone whose faith and conviction and knowledge put her in the Premier League, whilst sadly like my beloved Leicester City, I was still in a lower division.

I have been humbled at times by Fiona's faith, a faith that I believe flowered at university, made on the strongest foundations built by her dear parents Noel and Betty. It was this faith that made her take a job with the church when she could have been running a school or a business. She was so intelligent and able, she could have gone for wealth and fame but she chose to serve Christ here in our town, to look after me and inspire our two wonderful children. It was the right choice.

I want to refer to one example of the spirituality of the shower! Fiona prayed at all times and in all places, including the shower!

Each morning at precisely 7:30 (as a teacher I work to set times) I would walk into the bathroom to say goodbye. Fiona would ask me what was happening at school that day and what she needed to pray for. I knew that at any time of stress or difficulty, whenever she prayed everything would be alright. She had total trust in God's love for us and in his plans for us.

Thursday the 16th September was no different from any other day and I went to work confident in my wife's love and prayers for me. She had been listening in the days before to the CD you heard as we walked in: 'Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee', being her favourite track.

If you reflect on these words they have so much meaning for her life and death. Towards the end of the song the lyrics talk about giving yourself to God for eternity and this is what I believe has happened.

As for my requests for prayer that morning, I know she did pray and my request was answered, but not in the way either of us anticipated.

God's plans for Fiona and all our family, for our friends, for our two churches and for our school have been shaken to the core this past week, but I remain utterly convinced that there is a purpose if we but can give our hearts, our minds and our feet to God.

All of you have shown that when a terrible tragedy occurs, then human beings show a love that reflects God's love. We simply have to build from where we find ourselves now.

The love carries on

Our marriage has come to its end but the love carries on. This service marks the closure of this chapter of our lives as a family, but also the beginning of a new chapter.

Long ago we made a pact that when death did us part we would have a mirror image service of our wedding day, hence the picture of Fiona as a bride on the front of your service booklets. Fiona will leave the church to the hymn she entered as a bride, 'Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord'. And as a family we shall move forward, in some pain and sorrow, but trusting in God's plans for us and in the promise of the resurrection.

Whilst there is great sadness in parting from Fiona we say goodbye with great pride, pride in the way she has moulded our lives to this point, and pride in the influence she will still continue to have over us. I believe she has **showered** us with love **through you all** from the moment she returned home to God early last Friday morning.

We know that she will rest in peace for eternity and her soul will 'tell out the greatness of the Lord'.

At the Memorial Mass

I know that if Fiona was physically present here this evening she would want to share our most important AIF (Association of Interchurch Families) memory which was our first encounter with AIF in September 1984. This was a crucial and almost mystic moment, a decisive point in our relationship.

We had been going out since April 1982 and the very bond that

Our shared faith in Christ

had attracted us to each other, our shared faith in Christ, appeared certain to end in painful separation. We were both so committed to our own denominations that we were unhappy, in conscience, with fudging or ignoring our differences.

Instinctively we had come to distrust people who said that we should just go ahead and ignore the two churches. We equally had no time for people who said that one or both of us should leave our denominational families. The third approach of accepting that our differences were irreconcilable and going our separate ways, ran in the face of what we were experiencing as a couple, and quite frankly felt wrong.

Double belonging

In a diary she kept at the time Fiona said of our courtship how we learned so much about each other's churches, and the very positive feelings that this was creating. We were, without realising it, experiencing the essence of the interchurch family experience, which is that double belonging, belonging to two churches, is a positive and unifying experience that strengthens us as Christians. It may be a paradox, but the focus on our differences was in fact highlighting the essential unity and shared heritage of Christians. Far from weakening our faith, it was strengthening and enriching it by our coming together from different starting points on our spiritual journeys.

Strength and enrichment

Nevertheless, by September 1984, we had independently, without knowing each other's thoughts, come to the conclusion that there was no way forward – and then God intervened in a most dramatic way.

A last effort to save our relationship

It was Fiona who spotted a small advert in the Catholic weekly magazine, *The Tablet*, for an Interchurch Family gathering in a place called Spode, near Birmingham. As a last effort to save our relationship we applied to go to Spode. We were not sure what the weekend was going to be like.

On the motorway we talked about what to do if the meeting at Spode turned out to be nothing to do with our situation. What if AIF was in fact an interfaith group for marriages between Christians and followers of other faiths. We agreed that if the weekend offered no way forward we would turn straight around and drive back to London. Secretly, we both feared it would be the end of our pilgrimage together.

The evening was rainy and dark. Maybe my memory is playing tricks but I recall mist or fog – perhaps that was our feeling rather than a meteorological reality.

We were late arriving. As we drove into Spode in the gloom and mist, I said to Fiona that I had a strange feeling that I was going to meet someone I knew there.

There are others too

We walked into the reception area. Again imagination may be playing tricks but I remember walking out of darkness into a bright entrance area. We went towards the desk and the first person I saw I recognised; it was Ian who was well known to me, an altar server friend of my eldest brother, a member of my home parish in Leicester, a person whom I looked up to. In an instant I realised that God had answered our prayer for guidance and light. Within seconds of learning that Ian, a Catholic, was married to Hazel, an Anglican, I knew that Fiona and I were going to be married.

It took Fiona a little longer to realise the significance of that moment but the remainder of the weekend was like sunshine breaking through mist. Every person we spoke to made more of the mist disappear and provided light to our darkness. That weekend proved to be the most decisive of our lives as God showed us the way forward. It is difficult to express the sensation of relief and real spiritual joy that we both went through. It was a blinding, Road to Damascus experience.

Obstacles become opportunities

All the way back to London we could not stop talking about how this and that obstacle to our marriage was not, in fact, an obstacle but a new word, an AIF word, an opportunity. The barriers to our marriage had been toppled like a pile of dominoes. All that was left for me was to plot the moment to ask Fiona to marry me. By chance we had arranged to go to Canterbury Cathedral the next weekend. It seemed too good an ecumenical opportunity for a historian like me to miss, and there in the Cathedral we became engaged. I hope this explains just how important Interchurch Families has been to Fiona and me. We never had any doubts that it was AIF that enabled our marriage to take place.

*God is powerfully calling
Christians to come together*

We made an agreement several years ago that when our marriage came to its natural end we would seek to have an interchurch funeral that would reflect the reality of our whole marriage. The fact that Fiona was honoured in both our churches, by our Catholic Church and our Anglican Church, was a huge privilege but also reflects the reality of what we had experienced in our lives together, that God is powerfully calling Christians to come together.

This is the fortieth day after Fiona's death and perfectly completes the journey that God so powerfully influenced twenty years ago in Spode. It is very special to us that Interchurch Families arranged

this mass tonight, another of what I call our ‘God-incidences’.

I could not finish without mentioning the fruits of our marriage; our dear children Katie and Jonathan. On the very day that Fiona died, Katie asked me with real concern: ‘Will this mean that we won’t be going to our Interchurch Families weekends at Swanwick any more?’ I said to her that it was quite the opposite, that Interchurch Families would play an even more important part in our lives; we are, after all, part of God’s Family, and Interchurch Families is its purest expression.

Yes, we have much to thank Interchurch Families for. Without AIF we would not be here today.

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