

23rd November 2020

Dear Friends

In the remembering service this Sunday evening we shall be naming people we have loved who have gone before us.

As we do so I wanted to share with you my own memory of someone in my family who has gone before, not because she is more special than anyone else but because she was special in her own way. She was called Vera and she was my maternal grandmother.

On one of our bookcases at home are a beautiful bound set of the complete works of Charles Dickens. He was a prolific author and I think it would take several years to read all his stories, but these volumes are really inviting with their original drawings capturing the extraordinary characters Dickens peopled his novels with. They were a twenty first birthday gift to my grandmother from her parents and she made them an eighteenth birthday gift to me. It was a remarkably generous gift.

Vera was born to a middle-class family who owned a small chain of grocers in the early years of the twentieth century. She wanted for nothing in a material sense, but her parents were difficult people with their very definite ideas about what a young woman could and couldn't do. They confiscated her first tube of lipstick when she was sixteen years old and when she was offered a place to study at the London school of Economics, they refused to let her go. I have to confess it's a little difficult to reconcile my mother's account of the kindly grandparents who made her so welcome when she was a child with my grandmothers account to the same people but I think this shows different people can have very different experiences of the same people.

I find it quite hard to imagine my grandmother as a young woman or conceive of quite how restricted the world she grew up in was but I know she was bright, curious and more than capable of asserting herself if she could. She desperately wanted to leave home and so she took the only route open to her, she married. Her husband, my grandfather was called called Eugene. It proved to be a difficult marriage, but Vera always made the best of the situation even though she was now much poorer than she ever was at home. During the second world war when Eugene was stationed in

Cumbria the family lived in an old country house where my mum can remember the local children being rubbed down with goose geese and sown up in their underclothes to keep them warm.

Vera wasn't work shy and when the family moved to Shropshire in the nineteen fifties, she found employment in Beatties, the great department store in Wolverhampton where she served in the ladies' hat department. She liked shops and when she retired, I remember how she loved volunteering in the local Oxfam shop. She raised three children, Michael, Hilary and Philip and took a fierce pride in their achievements and the achievements of her grandchildren. I still have the letter of appreciation she wrote to the church secretary of my first pastorate following my induction shortly before she died.

I stayed with her so many times over the years, sleeping on a camp bed in her spare room and some-how she squeezed our whole family into her small house for Christmas many years. She was intelligent, well informed and opiniated, never shy of an argument and loved conversation. She woke at six in the morning and cat napped her way through the day listening to radio four from dawn to dusk. She remembered unlikely facts about the family which enabled us to discover branches of the family we hardly knew existed and when there was a rift in our immediate family, she was the one who retained a thread of connection that was essential for the reconciliation that happened many years later. When she died, I inherited much of her furniture and like her I listen to radio four from dawn until dusk.

Her grave lies in the church yard at Tong in Shropshire where she worshipped for many years and in the spring, it is surrounded by daffodils.

I wish I could have recorded her memories but never found a way of doing this and as I remember her, I am aware that other people would complete the jigsaw puzzle of her life and remember her in very different ways. We know each-other, even those dearest and nearest to us in partial and incomplete ways. In I Corinthians 13 we are promised that the day will come when we shall know fully even as we are fully known for we worship a God who Psalm 139 tells us, knows us completely. My grandmother died

suddenly and there were still things I would like to have asked her and that I would like to have told her about. I remember her with gratitude.

In our remembering service on Sunday evening we shall be remembering all those we name with gratitude because they were special to God who is the Alpha and the Omega the beginning and the end.

Your friend and pastor

Mark