

When Jo died we wanted to scream and shout, 'Why God?', 'Why now?', 'Why her?', 'Why did such a thoroughly good and wonderful person have to die?' We're shocked and struggling to make sense of it. And God looks on and knows our pain and sadness and anger and sorrow. God's son Jesus also died young, and all he ever wanted was to help people love each other and be happy. And yet he died in a most terrible way. So God does understand. God reaches out and loves us, holds us in our sadness, and walks beside us in our journey of shock and grief.

Amongst the contacts on my phone is a very special one: Jo Friend. It's there because Jo decided to have a work phone as well as a personal one and so as to distinguish between numbers I put in Jo Friend. Someone said to me the other day 'Jo was everyone's best friend'. How true – she gave herself completely to everyone. In recent days people have described her as warm and bubbly, joyful, one of the friendliest and happiest people on the planet, beautiful inside and out. You will each have your special memories of Jo and reasons to be grateful for her.

I first met Jo when Andy and Katie were small, at their home on The Parkway. I came away very struck by this beautiful and vivacious young woman and wishing that someone like her could be part of the church. Little did I know that years later she would become my colleague and dear friend. She began working as Children's Worker here in 2010 after an interview during which she confessed, 'well, I don't have any experience but I love God!'

We've already touched on some of the many things she was involved in. Whether it was supporting mums and babies, gathering teams of volunteers to help her, having fun with teenagers on a disastrous holiday in Scotland and more recently on the best holiday of all at Wydale, she did everything with the same care and generosity, love and compassion, energy and enthusiasm. Her contribution to the life of this church has been enormous. Whenever people ask me what's happening at St Laurence's – is the church growing, I immediately mention Jo's initiatives through which people are warmly accepted and made to feel they belong and encouraged to find faith themselves. She worked very hard and was

committed to everything she did. At times when some of us were losing heart and feeling weary she'd say we must go on with this, we can't let the families down. All of us - children, young people and older ones - adored her and she loved us all. Hers was a rare gift: it was such a joy to see her in action, giving her all with that warm smile on her face which made us all feel special. We'll miss her dreadfully.

Before Jo worked here she came to this church to seek God and as her faith grew we saw God's love shining brightly from her. She spoke of how she would pray for God's gifts of love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and goodness, faithfulness and gentleness, because she was human like us and needed God's help in order to shine. Her faith in God was inspirational. She spoke about it so naturally and passionately. She was excited by the vision for Messy Church and when she initially asked for a team of people to help her she was nearly knocked down in the rush. She planned Messy meticulously and provided an inclusive space for children and parents to enjoy crafts, worship and a meal together.

Jo had a heart to reach out to the wider world too, encouraging her groups to choose a charity each term for which they raised funds:

- A curry and quiz night for a project in Ghana
- A Big raffle raising £1000 for those affected by the earthquake in Haiti
- Linking Sunday Supper girls with street children in Guatemala

She's made such a difference to so many lives here and around the world.

Jo was aware that she needed space away from it all to connect with God. She enjoyed times on Holy Island and at Scargill House in Wharfedale. In January this year she went on a retreat at Scargill. The group taking part decorated a chair with flowers during the week – you can see the photo of Jo sitting in it on the back of the order of service. They called it the chair of the beloved and were encouraged to sit in it and know that each one is God's beloved daughter or son.

In our Bible reading, we heard that love always protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. We saw that love in Jo protecting her family, trusting God for everything, hoping that more and more would recognise God's love for them, persevering when others were slow to keep up with her vision.

What a gift God gave us in Jo and what a legacy she leaves behind. Whether you're a family member, friend or belong to one of her groups, let's allow her faith and love to live on in us. It's hard to imagine a future without Jo but we can continue to spread the love, joy and hope she had because it came from God and is available to us all.

Jesus' friends were broken after his death, just didn't know what to do with themselves. We recognise those feelings ourselves **and** Christians know that death was not the end for Jesus – he broke the power it held over him and came through it to a glorious Easter Day. Jo believed, as Christians do, that death is not the end for us but the end of the beginning. Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, when God sent his Holy Spirit to comfort us in our raw grief, to help us shine with his life, love and light, and to give us hope for the future.

Today we give thanks for Jo and picture her sitting in the chair of the beloved – welcomed and happy in the presence of God whom she loved and served so well.

Jo used to say a loud 'Amen' at the end of her prayers and so I want to say a big amen to all that we've said about her today.