

‘By their fruits you will know them,’ declared Jesus.

It’s forty years almost to the day since I took my first funeral.

Also the first funeral I ever attended, so a steep learning curve.

My boss, the vicar, gave strict and mostly helpful instructions.

But I was not to preach or even mention the deceased’s name.

I was allowed to mention the sex only to discover

it was their gender not their love life, so tres disappointing.

My boss meant well and wanted to level things.

We are all equal before God so need no commendation.

He was also wary of canonising distinctly un-saintly people.

I’ve never really met a saint, but I’ve buried a lot!

My predecessor at Helmsley had the same rule.

He ministered there for 37 years, never once naming the dead.

He died in office, unnamed at his own funeral.

The vicar with no name – Gee and I wanted to thank him!

Whatever, once I was off the leash I disobeyed my boss.

and carefully crafted a vignette to catch a life.

My simple reason was that the incarnation  
was about God inhabiting one human life,  
thereby hallowing all lives,  
supremely worthy of celebration.

In listening to their nearest and dearest  
and setting that against my knowledge of the deceased  
I tried to mark their fruits.

Some fruits cropped up time after time.

Very caring, hard-working, straight-talking, humorous,  
very Yorkshire, very faithful, never missing Songs of Praise.

Some fruits surprised me.

A former ship's captain in his late eighties in a wheelchair  
who'd rowed thirty badly burned sailors 300 miles to safety  
after their boat had been torpedoed by a U boat.

Shortly before dying he was calling for his charts,  
preparing to row to heaven.

Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia...

What a fruit!

Why wait for a funeral?

Spare a thought today for what your fruits are.

I used to be plagued by three ecclesiastical terrorists  
who tried to make every church meeting hell.

‘We know all too well what you’re against,’ I told them once,  
‘But what are you for, what are your fruits?’

Maybe tell others the fruits they bear which you cherish.

St Paul gives us a few for starters in Galatians:

Love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, peace.

Speaking of which My great granddad Dent  
told of an inscription a widow  
put on her husband’s gravestone  
in Ashover, Derbyshire:

‘At peace... ..until I come.’

Catching the fractious spirit of the artist rather than the sitter.

By your fruits you will be known.