

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

By PATIENCE PURCHAS

I COULD PUT TOGETHER A SMALL GALLERY of four photographs which encapsulate my father's life. The first shows a grinning small boy, his fair hair bleached almost white by the sun. The next a young man smiling lovingly at the toddler in his arms, a small boy holding his hand. The third a lean middle-aged man sitting in his shirt sleeves contentedly contemplating an Italian landscape. The last a shrunken, bent old white-haired man half smiling for the camera at a family party in his garden. I can relate to each picture, indeed I am in two of them. My life has been profoundly affected by the person they represent. Before I can consider my father's dying I need to tell about his life.

It interests me that I should begin writing this reflection on 31 October, the day the Anglican Calendar invites remembrance of the saints and martyrs of the Reformation era. My father was born in 1904 into a deeply Protestant household, and that had a profound effect on him all his life. His father was of Northern Irish Presbyterian stock and his mother Methodist, but by the time they married both belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, a Calvinistic denomination which held to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Scriptures and an interest in eschatology only equalled by an obsessive loathing of the Roman Catholic Church. His parents had met and married in Australia and my father was brought up in the sub-tropical climate of Queensland. He had a mixed experience in childhood. His mother was a beautiful woman, warmly loving, humorous and kind by nature and with a depth of faith I have rarely seen equalled, albeit within a very narrow understanding. My grandfather, who would, I imagine, have been an ardent supporter of the Rev. Ian Paisley, had a difficult personality and became violent and obsessive, so that my grandmother left him for a number of years, mainly to spare the children from his violence. She took him back again when he was old, ill and confused, and nursed him with dignified care until his death. My father always adored his mother, but would never speak about the time his parents separated. Presumably it was felt to be shameful and no doubt their church was fiercely critical of a woman who failed in obedience to her husband. I imagine, though I was never told, that it was about this time my father severed his connection with the Brethren, disgusted by the way they treated his

mother. It was a very long time before he felt able to join another church. As far as I know, he never lost his Christian conviction and kept up the practice instilled in childhood of daily Bible reading and Sunday worship. He kept the Sabbath, though not in a puritanical way, always said grace before meals and would allow no profanity in his presence. He had never been baptized, since the Brethren practise adult baptism, and so did not receive communion. My mother came from a family who were Church of England to the bone, and my father was happy for his own children to be baptized and eventually confirmed. He attended various churches at different times, mostly Anglican, and eventually in his late forties was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England. He became a very active church member until he had to stop driving. For the last few years of his life he attended a United Reformed church, drawn as much by the seriousness of the preaching as by the convenience of proximity. Preaching was always very important to my father: that was part of his Protestant heritage.

My father had to leave school at sixteen because of his parents' separation and qualified as an architect at evening classes. In the late 1920s he travelled to England, met my mother on the ship and married her some years later. Together they weathered the depression and married when he found a job with the Architects' Department of the London County Council. I am the younger of his two children, born in 1939. In 1940 they decided that my mother should go back to Australia with my brother and myself, leaving my father in London where he had a reserved occupation. The poignancy of the moment of parting is caught in the photograph. I was always aware that my father felt cheated of my early childhood. He was very loving towards me and concerned for my welfare. His three granddaughters were particularly precious to him. The war brought an extra sadness to him when his youngest brother was killed on active service. My mother felt some guilt that she had left my father to face the blitz and cope with bereavement on his own, and I guess I caught some of that guilt. The family was reunited in 1945 and my father continued to work for what became the Greater London Council until his retirement in 1969, rising to a very senior post in the Housing Department.

Like my brother, I graduated from university, married and had children. My brother became a schoolteacher and I married a parish priest and eventually was ordained myself. My parents were there when I was ordained a deaconess and then seven years later a deacon, but were too frail to come to my priesting after a further seven years, or to be present when I presided at the eucharist for the first time. By that

time the mental confusion which clouded my father's last two years had begun, and it was hard for him to understand what had happened.

His six grandchildren were a great joy to my father and an enrichment to his long years of retirement. For nearly twenty years in the 1970s and 1980s he was able to pursue his great interests of water-colour painting, gardening, travel and reading. He fed his mind, developed his creativity and broadened his horizons. They were golden years. Lean and fit well into his eighties, the disabilities of old age came very hard. His experience from his eighty-fifth year was one of gradual loss, first of his failing sight, so that he had to stop driving, and then painting and reading became increasingly difficult. At the end he was almost blind, able to discern only confusing shadows. Stiffening of the joints meant that gardening became a frustrating toil, rather than a therapeutic pleasure, and it was a great relief when an expert gardener was found who would take over the care of the garden he had made with such creative skill. Travels abroad, and eventually in England, came to an end.

Old age has been defined as the stage in life when losses are not replaced. Loss seemed to follow loss as old friends and family died and he was gradually immobilized by a long slow process of physical decline. Hardest of all, as his weakening heart deprived his brain of oxygen, his mind became confused, though he was rational to the end. He was in hospital for his ninetieth birthday, sent there because his heart was very weak and he had lost his sense of balance. He came home with a zimmer frame, but never recovered his independence, endured the increasing humiliations of physical weakness and died a month after his ninety-first birthday. The cause of death was given as heart failure and pneumonia but in reality he died of extreme old age. His body wore out and began to decay, so that he had to be given morphine to deaden the pain. My mother, herself now ninety-one, continues to live in the home they bought in 1948. She is frail but, at the time of writing, still chooses to live alone and is just able to cope with plenty of help. She is bewildered by the ending of a relationship which lasted sixty-one years.

My father was not a saint but he was a man of integrity, a devoted husband and a loving if sometimes irascible father. He had a clever brain, a thirst for knowledge and a real interest in what his family were up to. He delighted in our company and loved a good discussion. He was interested in religion though he found it very hard to discuss his personal beliefs, having all the inhibitions of his class and generation. He gradually shed many of his inherited prejudices but retained

something of the Brethren mind-set. Getting doctrine right was very important to him. My husband well remembers being daunted to find that his girlfriend's father wanted to discuss early heresies with him!

Visiting Pop after a holiday or some new experience led to a pleasurable 'unpacking' process. As he grew older he gradually became increasingly dependent on visits to keep his spirits up. He called it being cheered up, but it was more than that. As his mobility declined, he seemed to need to draw on the vitality of his visitors. The frustration engendered by his physical limitations, and the anxiety that his mental confusion caused him, meant that he needed affirmation and reassurance. I found myself encouraging him and bolstering him up in the way one might an uncertain or anxious child. Except that, of course, he was not a child. It was necessary to find a way of relating to him that both recognized his status as my father and a man of venerable years, and yet also acknowledged his dependence.

Actually, I had hoped that my father would keel over in the garden one day and die rapidly from a merciful heart attack. That was not to be. He died by millimetres from an inexorable process of decay. He reminded me of an ancient, rusty engine which stutters into life after several attempts but goes slower and slower. It is very easy to sentimentalize the frailty of the very elderly and deny the painful reality. 'Like a white candle in a holy place, so is the beauty of an aged face' go the words of a sentimental song. It was hard to find beauty in the ravages time etched on my father's features and I sympathized deeply with the frustration his loss of sight brought. I still find it deeply sad to remember how shaking and clumsy his architect's hands became. Most of the time he endured with a patient stoicism. I came to the conclusion that, as a race, we are asked to show more courage at the end of our lives than at any other stage. If I found it anywhere, it was in that courage that I found beauty.

It is difficult to maintain the dignity of someone who needs help with many of his bodily functions. Spooning food into my father's mouth, wiping his chin, urging him to have just one more mouthful, was very like feeding my babies. Except that, of course, he was not a baby. I resisted helping him to the loo because I think he would have found that nearly unbearable and there were others who could do that for him, but I did once pick him up in my arms when he had fallen and could not get up. He said he was amazed at my strength but, truth to tell, he was very light by that time, as light as a child. So I held in my arms the man who had so proudly carried me as a child.

There comes a stage in the increasing weakness of the very elderly when decisions have to be made for them. We tried not to play games

with my father, and to give him choices. The decision that he should go into hospital was made by the doctor, but at my mother's insistence. She had had enough of wet beds and spoon-feeding. My brother and I went with him, waited three hours while they found him a bed in the geriatric unit and saw him settled. We felt protective and caring but my father hated the time in hospital, was confused and frightened, and hugely relieved to get home. We vowed then that he would end his days at home and so, thank God, he did.

The Social Services arranged for carers to get him up in the morning and to bed at night. They were kindly, if sometimes rough and ready. They tended to scold him as they might a naughty child. It was hard to see him half led, half carried to bed, and good to go to kiss him and tuck him in as he had done for me years before, knowing that he found my presence reassuring and comforting. Knowing he could not read it, I used to pick up his book of Bible readings and read to him. He loved this and sometimes asked me to repeat the passage. He had become distressed because he could not remember the words of the Lord's Prayer or the twenty-third psalm, but would say them with me or, as he grew more forgetful, echo my words in the way a small child does in church. This repetition of old, familiar words sometimes felt like a comforting incantation, sometimes like a drowning man clutching at a raft. I recall a former contemplative nun telling me that in community they fed on the Scriptures like food. They gained physical and psychic energy that way. I thought of this as I saw my father drawing strength from powerful words in the Scriptures. I began to select what I called 'strengthening' passages to read to him. I particularly drew on Isaiah, St John, St Paul and Revelation. Sometimes a verse would produce the response such as 'That was the first bible verse I learnt'. He came from a tradition where memorizing bible passages was expected – his mother could recite the whole of Psalm 119 from memory. We had never prayed together as a family, though we said grace before meals, but now I offered to pray with him and his gratitude was heart-warming. Thus, like many before me, I became the comforter, nurturer and protector of the person who helped give me life and who had lovingly encouraged, guided and supported me for many years.

It was a role reversal, but a very complex one. At one level, it was simply a matter of strength, that one who had been strong was now very weak and so needed supporting. I certainly did not want to become my father's mother, so I resisted using the language of childhood to him. There is a terrible temptation to speak over the head of a confused old person, and we all made that mistake at times. It was

important to resist addressing him as a child, too. He was not a 'good boy' if he ate his dinner, nor was he 'naughty' if he refused. He was sometimes tiresome and resentful, but those were reasonable responses to a tedious existence. He had every right to be angry. Rather than trying to jolly him out of depression, I agreed with him when he said one day 'This is no kind of life, lass'. It was hard, and I was sad that he had to endure it and I told him so. I could not offer the child's reassurance that I would make it all better soon. I could remind him as an adult that it would not last for ever and, as the weeks passed, it felt right to say 'I don't think it will be long now'.

By this time, I had allowed myself to be a priest for him. In a way he never acknowledged my priesthood. It came too late for him to enter into and, in any case, I doubt if he ever really understood why I wanted ordination. It was not that he was opposed to women priests, rather that he would have found it easier if his daughter had stayed as she was. But when he was close to death he seemed to recognize the priest in me and I had the very special privilege of ministering to him to the end. He had left the Brethren long before and, I hope, never regretted that, but I think the Brethren have more in common with Roman Catholics than they would like to believe. 'Give me a child when he is seven . . .', the Jesuit educator is supposed to have said. We may make a reasoned decision to leave the church of our childhood, but we do not easily, if ever, cut the emotional and subconscious bond.

I wondered if my father worried that he would not find salvation outside the strict confines of his youth, and was heartened when he chose 'Amazing grace' as one of his funeral hymns. He was not a sacramental Christian and I shall never know whether my decision not to have a celebration of Holy Communion in his house was the right one. I felt he would have agreed to it to please me and I did not want it done that way. When I offered to bring him communion he seemed not to want it and I did not want to cajole him into receiving the holy mysteries. So I brought him with me in my mind when I received communion and particularly when I presided at the eucharist. We spoke of heaven in terms of rest and recovered strength and reunion with loved ones.

He died, as we had hoped, in his own home with his family supporting him. A superb district nurse took charge of the situation, organized a hospital bed and hoist, teams of nurses to tend him at regular intervals during the day and for his last two nights, a night nurse. Holding his hand in those last few days when he could hardly speak, I repeated familiar bible verses and prayers and sometimes sang

hymns very softly as one might do to a sleepy child. I laid my hand on his head in blessing and thanked God for that rare privilege. They were able to tell us a few hours before that he was dying, and I was with him with my mother and my husband as he died. My husband and I prayed as he took his last breaths and I commended him into the arms of God in my own words as I think he would have thought appropriate. It was dignified and quiet, the gentle, peaceful, loving Christian ending I had prayed for.

The last priestly service I was able to do for my father was plan his funeral. I chose not to lead the service myself and my husband did that for us. I knew I needed to be a mourner, and that leading a funeral requires a degree of professional detachment. My mother wanted just her family to be present, and indeed there would have been very few friends to invite. They had outlived almost all their generation. My father had chosen his funeral hymns, so we sang 'The King of love' and his wedding hymn, 'All people that on earth do dwell'. A friend sang 'Amazing grace', giving us space for reflection, and we had two strong readings, Isaiah 40:25-31 with its vision of strength and vitality renewed and 1 Peter 1:3-9 for its great affirmation of faith. There was no need for preaching – we had in any case forbidden a eulogy – the words of Scripture were enough. The opening words of one of Janet Morley's collects seemed exactly what we wanted to say.

O God who brought us to birth,
and in whose arms we die . . .

When a very old person dies, there is not that sense of loss – of life being cut off – that is experienced when a younger person dies. Rather we are comforted by a sense of completeness. The coffin was carried out to the words of the Nunc Dimittis and Bach's 'Jesu, joy of man's desiring'.

Many of my contemporaries can echo my experience of my father's dying. We reach middle age, our children leave home, we may be busy with careers, possibly having attained a senior level, and our parents become increasingly dependent. At an age when our parents found themselves free as never before, we are tied down, maybe as much as we were when our own children were small. Probably neither generation had anticipated it would turn out this way, and it is not surprising that some carers become resentful or angry. Some families have to make difficult decisions about where their parents live. People hold strong views about whether it is ever right to 'put mother in a home'. Since familial relationships tend to breed guilt in any case, it is hard to

sort out emotions. Part of that guilt may be because the grief at loss is matched or even outweighed by a profound sense of relief that, at last, there is some measure of freedom in sight. I was blessed in having had, on the whole, a healthy and loving relationship with my father. I was intrigued that one or two of the condolence letters I received spoke of the burden of guilt when a parent dies. One wrote: 'It is amazing how much unresolved childhood material resides in the middle-aged, even with quite straightforward relationships'. I wonder if the opportunity to minister to my father so closely enabled me to work through some of that material. If I felt some guilt that I had left him alone when I was a little child, there may have been a resolution in being able to care for him at the end.

The gift of a good experience of fatherhood was the richest legacy my father left me. When I got caught up in feminism – and I count myself a low-key feminist – I gave some thought to the language we use for God. Try as I might to convince myself that I wanted to call God 'Mother', I met a mental block. At the time I concluded that most women are trying to get away from their mothers! Reflecting on my relationship with my father I realized that I was content with Father as a preferred name for God. My father was not an obviously spiritual person, though he responded to the beauties of art and nature all his life. He was not devout and holy in the way his mother was – her spirituality shone through her. It is simply that because he was a good father to me, I can build on that experience and meet God as the Father. The father I knew in his last months was weak and vulnerable. Maybe there is something from that observation of vulnerability to take into my understanding of the Fatherhood of God. It is risky to be as vulnerable as that. You demand nothing. You risk neglect, rejection and insult. In another of her collects, Janet Morley addresses a 'Vulnerable God'. It is a challenging phrase to set beside such other liturgical expressions as 'God of all power and might'.

I have been asked to explore role reversal through my experience of caring for my father, and found it to have been both enriching and complex. Beyond the obvious reversal of dependency, I resist the analysis that would say the child became the parent – I was always my father's daughter, even when he could do nothing for himself. I needed him to be my father. What I did find was a new pastoral relationship as a priest to him. For the first time he looked to me for ministry and received such spiritual guidance as I could offer. I have never felt more truly a priest than when leading my father's faltering voice in prayer, feeding him with the words of eternal life, laying my hand on his head

as I assured him of God's blessing, commending him into our Father's arms.