

# Christopher Burgess a.a. RIP

4<sup>th</sup> December 1927 to 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014

There was once a famous preacher. Wherever he went people flocked to hear him speak and their faith was greatly strengthened. He thanked God for his success and for the ability to bring people closer to God. But one thing irked him. In his own parish, where people flocked to church, he noticed an old man who was always there at the back of the church. Through every homily that he preached, the old man was clearly saying his rosary. The preacher could see the beads moving through his fingers. So he complained to God asking why this man never really listened to him.

After a while, God sent his angel to the preacher who told him, *“God said, if it wasn’t for the prayers of this old man at the back of the Church, you would never have been the famous preacher that you are.”*

There are many famous people noted for their exploits their abilities and talents and whose stories will be read and re-read. What we fail to read about are the people who helped and supported them and put into effect that for which they were famous. These are the people whose stories are written not in books but into people’s lives and hearts, whose memories bring life, love, caring and compassion into the hearts of people every time their story is told. These people are the very essence, the substance of all that is good and creative and of value in life, and without whom there would be no famous people, no great figures, and no great accomplishments. Of this group, which number many, Fr Christopher, although not a tall man, stands head and shoulders above them all.

Christopher has spent nearly all his priestly life here in Hitchin, over 45 years; much of the time as a hospital chaplain. Jesus called us to look after the poor and vulnerable; and the sick are the most vulnerable in any society. Think of the thousands, no tens of thousands, of lives that Fr Christopher has touched with his gentle care and loving kindness, that brought a healing that only God could bestow. He is proof of the words of Jesus, who before he left this world, said to his disciples *“You will do even greater things than I did!”* Christopher believed this and fulfilled these words of Jesus.

There is another story about a holy man who brought about so much transformation among the people that God asked him how he could best reward him. The Holy man said, *“Lord, it is not I who transform people but you who work through me. I don’t want any reward. In fact I fear that this ability will make me proud and self-righteous. So all I ask is that my shadow be the one that heals and transforms people so that I never know what has been achieved through me. And so it was.*

I like to think that Christopher was that man. His quiet, reassuring presence, could easily be missed by the casual observer but it was a presence which brought reassurance, sustenance, hope and trust into people’s lives. No one who encountered him could fail to leave his presence without being refreshed and renewed.

Although we gather around his coffin today, it is hard to think of him as dead, as no more. All of us here can only think of his smile, see the gleam in his eye and the cheery word with which he greeted us. We would all wait expectantly for the next funny little story that he would never fail to tell and bring to conclusion with a chuckle. It could be a cold, dreary, sad day outside but Christopher would enter like a ray of sunshine and cast away the darkness. He was uplifting and reassuring. When you left him you felt that all was well, that all manner of things were well!

One of Christopher’s remarkable qualities was his ability to get on with people especially his religious superiors, some of whom could be more than difficult - and he saw off quite a sizeable number of them. Whereas other religious would find life with these superiors difficult to bear, Christopher welcomed them and supported them as he would any member of his family, whom he loved dearly. I

don't know one superior who would not have wanted Christopher in his community or valued his presence. He had the ability to make the most awkward of people feel relaxed and at ease.

Another of his great qualities was his dependability. He was utterly reliable, always ready to fill in and respond to any crisis with a calm that often belied the value he brought to everything he did. If Jesus was the cornerstone then Christopher was the bedrock, the solid dependable base, the reassurance on which we could, all of us, depend.

I am supposed to give a potted history of his life, the places he stayed the things he did; to tell you that he was born in Dublin 4<sup>th</sup> December 1927, grew up in Brockley and joined the Assumption in 1946; that he studied in Binden, Capnor and Hare street and Lormoy in France; about his short stint in Newhaven where he was parish priest and superior, his time in Bethnal Green and in Brockley. That he was ready to go on the missions but never made it because a new provincial changed this decision and sent him here in 1968. That he contracted Parkinson's disease. That he never complained or thought himself hard done by. That he never said an ill word about anybody. That for him everything was a blessing, just as he was a blessing for us.

But he was so much more than where he had been and what he had achieved. It is *"who he was"* – and still is if we let him - that sets him apart and distinguishes him. He was the one who enabled the various parish priests, who have served here, achieve the things they did. So I share with you the essence of a man who fulfils everything that we understand to be Holy, the model of holiness. And people like that never die; they just work with us in a new way.

But the real truth is that Christopher made God real for us. We often wonder what it would have been like if we had lived in Jesus' time, heard him speak, experienced his healing love, watched him cure people and perform miracles. Christopher did all that – he made God real. How many people did he save from the death of despair, the loss of hope, from loneliness? How many people did he cure because he revealed to them a God who loved them in sickness and in health? How many miracles did he perform, by transforming people's lives because he helped them realise how much God loved and valued them?

Fr Emmanuel d'Alzon, our founder called us to be workers of the kingdom. For us Assumptionists, Christopher was a prime example of this offering of the whole of his life in the service of the kingdom - a life of dedication, commitment and loyalty. Assumptionists are called to live in solidarity with the poor; Christopher devoted his life to this in his work among the sick. But, most of all, we are called to be like Christ; as St Paul said to the Galatians: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God's Son, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Or did Christopher say these words? **(Repeat)**

For this is what made Christopher the finest of Christ's disciples: Christ lived in him and he revealed Christ in the flesh to us Assumptionists, to his family, to you, the people of this parish, and to all those whom he encountered throughout his life of faith.

We tell the stories of Jesus life because we know they make him present. Let us tell the stories of Christopher and know that he, too, will be present in the many ways described. Then, as we tell his story, we, too, will be reassured with the memory of his smile, the twinkle in his eye, the love and value with which he held us. And his light will shine again in us, or should I say the light of Christ!

We know Jesus fulfilled the name he had been given – he was our Saviour. Our founder, Emmanuel d'Alzon fulfilled the name he had been given and revealed to all that God was with us. We can give Christopher no greater honour than to say that he, too, glowingly fulfilled his name: the Christ Bearer.