I realise that there is a lot that I don’t know about Fr Michael’s earlier life but what I do know is that, when his fatal accident occurred, this 78 year old priest was returning, on foot, from one of his pastoral walks, perhaps from visiting the sick – in time to put the kettle on and the biscuits out - for his meeting of the ‘As I Am’ group, this is the parish’s inclusion group, formed at Father Michael’s urgent request, to improve the welcome we give to LGBTQ+ parishioners, among others. And this was typical of an ordinary day for Fr Michael. Although retired, he was still working to make God’s kingdom come, gathering people in.

He arrived here in 2000 and set about bringing us up to date: this was a priest with a mobile phone! Forward thinking is a charism of the Assumptionist order: they are urged by their founder, Emanuel D’Alzon, to be ‘a man of faith and a man of their time’. Fr Michael was such a man. He started making changes. First, there was the refurbishment of the presbytery and the addition of the Doris Harris room, for private meetings with parishioners. And then there was the new sound system. Suddenly there were microphones everywhere and roving mics for those increasingly frequent moments when Father Michael went rogue, leaving the sanctuary to read the Gospel, preaching on the move, shaking hands everywhere, with MCs and acolytes scurrying after him with books, holy water sprinklers, candles and holy oils as needed. There were also some rather entertaining moments when he forgot to switch off the microphone at the end of Mass and we heard all sorts of interesting things broadcast to the whole parish! His early fondness for incense often left us feeling somewhat like the Israelites, as we grew accustomed to hearing a loud voice speaking from a cloud!

Fr Michael had this gift of allowing things to grow, of encouragement of people in all sorts of things they had thought they couldn’t do. Empowering laity was, perhaps his greatest legacy to us all. He supported us in all our endeavours both with equipment and with loud encouragement, ‘More power to your elbow!’ he would bellow, and when told that things were going well he would boom, ‘Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!’, ‘Bless your heart!’

Fr Michael himself was always reading and thinking and trying to grow. His sermons and conversations were peppered with gleanings from books and other stimuli. His sermons grew and expanded, occasionally beyond the limits of human endurance. His enthusiasm was boundless; whatever he found uplifting, he wanted to share.

He talked a great deal about ‘our journey of faith and of life’ and perhaps one of Fr Michael’s most memorable qualities was his vocation to ‘walk with people on their journey’. So many people owe him a debt of gratitude for his gentle pastoral care: parishioners, non-parishioners, homeless individuals, prisoners, pupils and students. He didn’t claim to have all the answers but he was with you along the way and that made all the difference.

It was a mark of how much he knew he was loved by his parishioners that led to his firm belief that we all wanted a blow by blow account of any health issues he had. Who can forget the saga of the foot?? Weekly updates were published in the newsletter, with every detail of treatment and progress. I think we were all a tiny bit disappointed when the matter was finally resolved.

An appreciation of Fr Michael would not be complete without mention of his fondness for a party: he took his treats and his joy seriously! He was a gregarious man and formed lifelong friendships with the people he met on life’s journey. Birthdays and anniversaries were advertised long in advance (sometimes a whole year!), appearing frequently on the agendas of parish council meetings and no secret was made of his expectations in terms of our delivering the fitting ‘party experience’! So many of the photographs you will see in the displays here, in the church, and in the hall are of Fr Michael beaming away at his genial best, mid – revel.

You might say that this man was plucked from life too soon. That he still had work to do and that we weren’t ready to lose him. Well, we are never ready to lose those whom we love. As for his work – it *is* done. His eighteen years of thoughtful, forward thinking pastoral care and leadership means that as he was walking home from visiting that day, to begin his meeting, he had put in place all that was needed to ensure that other people were empowered to visit the sick with Holy Communion; that, in his absence, we would be meeting to start new enterprises without fear, and that we were all enabled to continue God’s work of gathering in.

Father Michael’s life was dedicated to growing God’s kingdom. What a joyful job to have! Nobody knew this better than he did - and he shared the joy by sharing the job. Aren’t we lucky?!