

**Craig Philbrick** pays tribute to his father, Gary, whose funeral was held yesterday in Winchester Cathedral

# In my father's footsteps



Gary and Craig Philbrick after Craig's ordination to the diaconate, in 2019

LAST night, as I was putting our three-year-old daughter, Rose, to bed, the exhaustion hit me hard. The past 72 hours had been a whirlwind of sleepless nights and raw emotion since Dad died suddenly, after being found collapsed at home on Sunday evening. I was scared, angry, and utterly confused. As I struggled to get Rose into her pyjamas, she asked, "Are you sad because of Grampa?"

"Yes, are you?" I replied. She nodded and said, "Yes, but he's in heaven, and Jesus is looking after him and singing songs to him, which makes Grampa feel happy."

Children feel pain, too, but they have a remarkable way of speaking the truth simply and profoundly. In that moment, Rose was ministering to me — her dad, the minister. It is often in this way that the precious legacy of faith is carried on: through families, from parent to child, and then the child ministering back to the parents, just as I had to minister to Dad as I said goodbye to him last week in hospital.

The legacy of faith and love is even more remarkable in my case, because it had to leap over the walls of biology. I was Dad's foster-son, having left a home filled with violence, chaos, and brokenness (in every sense) at the age of just 15. When I was on the verge of taking my chances on the streets of Southampton, Dad gave me a room for a few nights. It turned out to be a lot longer. Together, we built a home filled with laughter, light, and love.

MY JOURNEY to meeting my dad, Gary, and becoming his foster-son began with a plate of biscuits: never underestimate the evangelistic reach of a good custard cream. As kids, my sisters and I would wander around our council estate early on a Sunday morning, looking for something to do, and St Alban's was the only place open. We soon discovered that, if we mostly sat quietly for 40 minutes and watched a strange act of worship take place (just a middle-of-the-road

service of holy communion, it turned out), we would get free squash and biscuits in the kids' corner at the end.

Over the next couple of years, I was invited to serve as an altar boy, and was paid 50p to sing in the choir, and very quickly the church became one of the few safe places in my life — a life in which I was bringing up two baby half-siblings, barely going to school, running a house, shop-lifting, and committing fraud regularly. Even when we moved to a new council estate, on Sundays I would creep out of the house in the early hours and walk the three miles back to this church.

One morning, at the age of 15, I was sent out to collect the family benefits (a week before we were al-

lowed to) and decided never to go home, preferring to spend my nights on a friend's floor. A week later, Social Services tried to find a place for me to stay, and at the very bottom of the list of potential guardians was the church.

A phone call was made, the church did what it is called to do, and the consequence was that I spent my last year of secondary school living with Gary (the Vicar), and with the curate's family, alternating one week at a time between them, eating all their food, having lots of chats, going off on summer clubs, putting on weight, and realising that life could be much bigger and more exciting than I had ever imagined: I began to dream again.

Two years later, a close and natural bond having formed between Gary and myself, I changed my surname to Philbrick. My identity was now firmly as a son of Gary, part of the Philbrick family. Gary became Dad.

DAD radiated the light of Christ: he was gentle, humble, and generous to all. Everyone who met him would say he was genuinely one of life's loveliest people. He gave of himself to others, and, regardless of what he was in the middle of doing, he always made you feel as if in that moment you were the only one who mattered, whether you were a pilgrim requesting a blessing at the end of your journey to Winchester Ca-

thedral, or someone living on the street.

Whoever it was, he would chat with them, make them feel seen, see the best in them, and show them God's interest in them. He built community wherever he went, welcoming relationships gently, just as God does with us.

In the same way, although he never forced his faith on me, in his vocation I saw what the gift of the priesthood could be when it comes from a place of humility, gentleness, and kindness.

ORDAINED deacon in 1986, Gary served all his ministry in the diocese of Winchester, first at Maybush, Fawley, and Swaythling, before becoming Area Dean of Southampton in 2007, and an Hon. Canon of Winchester Cathedral, in 2009. In 2013, he was made Rector of the seven Avon Valley Churches, and, in 2022, he was appointed Assistant Archdeacon in Winchester diocese and Chaplain of Winchester Cathedral — two posts that brought him much joy.

Eventually, following in my father's footsteps, in 2019, I was ordained, and am now Vicar of St Paul's, Weston-super-Mare. This was the culmination of a long journey: a legacy passed from father to son which showed me something of how our heavenly Father loves us. Now, my ultimate hope is in something bigger than Dad: in the Lord Jesus Christ. Dad's legacy to me, and to all of us who knew him — and now mourn him — is the inspiration to carry that light of Christ on into the world. That's what he would have wanted, because the gospel goes everywhere.

These are tough days, but God is still good. Now, I am to take courage because of my faith. I am not to fear, but to trust, just as Dad — and, now, my daughter — have shown me.

Rest in peace, Dad, and rise in glory.

I SHALL explore the theme of the "bread of life" next week, because it covers two Sundays. It is not the only lesson in these 11 verses worth reflecting on this week.

John often uses repetitive phrasing, circling around key ideas to drive them home. Here, he emphasises two verbs by repeating them. One appears three times: "Come to me." The other is used four times: "Come down."

The Greek word for "coming down", *katabasis*, can refer to a mythical journey into Hades, the shady world of the dead. Hades is similar to Sheol in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. In Classical mythology, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Orpheus make a *katabasis*. Two of them are heroes, boundary-breakers. The third does it for love — but the boundary between life and death is not so easily breached. Mortals cannot confound death.

Jesus makes a *katabasis* by coming down from the Father at his incarnation. While the mythical characters made their journey from light down into darkness (and back up again into light), Jesus's first

## Changed in sense and tense

### SUNDAY'S READINGS

Cally Hammond

#### 11th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 14: 1 Kings 19.4-8; Psalm 34.1-8; Ephesians 4.25-5.2; John 6.35, 41-51

"coming down" is from a greater light into the lesser light that is the realm of mortals. We usually think of light as "better" than darkness. But darkness can be a place of encounter, where we must "walk by faith, not sight" (2 Corinthians 5.7).

God's eternal Word does not belong to the realm of ordinary light. He is himself the Light (John 8.12); so, when he comes down from heaven, he does so as the Light shining in darkness (John 1.5-9).

In our mortal existence, we human beings are earthbound. We cannot plumb mythological depths by coming down to the abode of the dead. Neither can we soar up to the Christian heavens: we do not yet belong there, either. In their mythology, the Greeks had Icarus to warn them against that unwise ambition. In our scriptures, we have the tower of Babel and its consequences (Genesis 10.4) to deliver a similar warning.

We cannot "come down". We cannot "come up". But there is a third option, and it is full of power for Christians. We can respond to Jesus's invitation, as spoken three times in this lection: "Come to me."

Both here and earlier in John, Jesus associates "coming to me" with "having life". That revelation of meaning is taking place on two levels. First, the individual person must truly, freely, choose to change their circumstances: to accept

moving from one state of being to another.

From the divine perspective — the eternal "now", in which time does not exist — this free choice looks different. The Father, whose will it was that his Son should "come down", is the originator of every human impulse to "come to" Jesus. So, every genuine response to God's call is of divine origin. We can call this "double perspective", or "double motivation".

John's theology is often complex, but his message is usually simple. If we want to come to the Lord, we must change. Our old selves (Ephesians 4.22) will not do. It may happen in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15.52), or it may be the work of a lifetime. It could even be both. But we must change (active), and be changed (passive), and change ourselves (reflexive), if we are to be always with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4.17).

Active change means that we modify how we live. Passive change means letting God change us. Reflexive change refers to our inner process of challenge and dialogue — the battle of heart and mind, soul and spirit — to find the place where there will be no more need for change.

As so often, Jesus confounds expectation. His first "coming down" means coming out from God, to come among us, but he has another coming down, a second *katabasis*. The New Testament includes references to it, and it is recorded in the Apostles' Creed, too: "he descended into hell" (modern translations say, "to the dead").

That creed refers to the place of descent as "the lowest place of all". It is confirmation of our Christian hope: Christ has pervaded the entire *cosmos*, infiltrating every corner of every part of every possible place, to which we can come, or from which we may return. Thanks to him, our resting-place will be in the "highest place" — *in excelsis*: in heaven. His invitation is eternal: "Friend, come up higher" (Luke 14.10).