

# Harry Robinson's Funeral Service

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Date: 12 April 2011

Preacher: Canon David Short

[ 0 : 00 ] Harry Robinson's funeral was held at 1 p.m. on April 12, 2011, in St. John's Church, Vancouver.

On this recording, you will hear the remembrances given by Harry's friend, Merv Hanson, and nephew, the Reverend Dr. Peter Robinson, on behalf of Wycliffe College, Toronto.

The sermon will be given by Canon David Short, and the prayers will be given by Harry's son-in-law, the Reverend Guy Bellarby.

He was with Jim Stevens, his last friend from college days at the University of Toronto. He had celebrated his 84th birthday just five days before at an Anglican Network clergy conference, ever staying involved right till his final days.

You may have read, Reverend Tony Burton, and former Bishop of Saskatchewan, had this to say about Harry. A gentle giant, physically and morally, he combined a probing, intuitive intelligence with an enormous love of people and focused on the gospel task.

[ 1 : 13 ] He was a brilliant, original, and unpredictable preacher, and a perceptive critic of the interplay between the gospel and contemporary literature. Another bishop, Anglican Network's Charlie Masters, also remembered Harry with these words, The Lord used Harry in a mighty way in two of Canada's great cities, Toronto and Vancouver.

He was of great encouragement in my life, and even took the time at one point to encourage me to consider ordination, for which I will always be grateful. These quotes summarize the impact Harry had on those who came to know him and be influenced by him.

I will try to give you a brief glimpse of the man who moved to Vancouver in 1978 to accept the position of rector of St. John's, Shaughnessy. With him were his family, loving wife Fran and children Pam, Jill and David.

Peggy and Guy followed shortly thereafter. Harry was a very different clergyman than most of us had ever encountered before. He was an imposing figure, big physically, and yet at the same time quiet, gentle, and somewhat slow-moving.

He wasn't much for doing the talking. He was a good listener, however. A subtle question or two on his part usually produced an overflowing response out of the other person, who couldn't take the silence.

[ 2 : 38 ] I fell for that trap during our very first meeting when he visited our home. The periods of science turned me into a non-stop talker. I had originally thought we were going to learn more about this new fellow in town.

Instead, Harry had a complete Hanson family history in the 30 minutes we were together. He had a huge impact on the St. John's congregation from the start.

I'll expand on that in a moment, but first I thought it might be helpful to briefly review his life in Ontario. Harry was one of six brothers and one sister, with a mother who was an imposing figure herself.

Tall and self-confident, she did not suffer trifles easy. His father was a well-known lawyer who expressed his own individuality by constructing Toronto's first and only log house on the banks of the Don River in Hogs Hollow, just north of the city.

The boys had their own room over the garage. With six of them growing up in their own space, you won't be surprised to learn that Harry became a stalwart of the university wrestling team.

[ 3 : 44 ] He and his friend Jim also taught swimming at the university, and they spent some of their summers working in the bush together. He attended St. John's York Mills Anglican Church as a youth and young adult.

He was also greatly influenced during the time he spent as a leader in the inter-varsity pioneer camps. That is where he met and fell for Fran, the woman who was going to become his wife. During this time, he also felt the call to the Anglican ministry, studied theology, and graduated from Wycliffe College in 1955. He and Fran were married in 1956, and after his ordination, they moved to Kingston, where they successfully planted a new church, Church of the Redeemer on the outskirts of town.

Part of his ministry was to the prisons in the city. A few years later, in 1978, Harry accepted a posting to Little Trinity in an area known as Toronto's east side. Under his leadership, Little Trinity flourished, and to this day, many of Little T's parishioners fondly remember his ministry with warmth and gratitude.

Harry and Fran also carried on with their involvement with pioneer camps. In the mid-70s, they attended a girls' camp at Pioneer Pacific on Fetus Island. His teaching skills and wonderful way with kids and adults impressed St. John's parents in attendance.

[ 5 : 04 ] A couple of years later, when they were looking for a new minister, he was approached and asked to apply. He did and was offered the job. He and the family arrived in the fall of 1978.

It wasn't long before Harry's presence was being felt. He started by making sure that the pews were equipped with Bibles. We were encouraged to follow along the texts of his sermons in the pew Bibles.

Non-verbally, of course, we were being led to the Bible as the unchanging reference point for our faith. Harry made it clear that the basis for our faith was our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord, and every sermon delivered from the pulpit was based upon the truth in the scriptures.

Our congregation was beginning to grow, partly because of the teaching we were receiving. Harry also changed the prominence and purpose of the music program during Sunday's services at St. John's.

He rightly believed that the music should complement our worship instead of being a performance. This refocus caused so much consternation amongst some people that about a third of the congregation left to less radical churches.

[ 6 : 13 ] A bit of a setback early in his life at St. John's, but a move that was necessary. As most of you know, the music program at St. John's has returned in a wonderful way. What a difference we began to experience.

For many of us, the essence of the Christian message became clear for the first time. Our lives were being changed in part through the teaching we were receiving. Harry's sermons often seemed to wander about, and sometimes the message was not entirely clear.

However, his sermons usually provoked further thought and discussion and required us to dig deeper into God's word to better understand the passage. Harry's sermons truly brought forth the mystery of God.

But Harry was not content to just lead services and preach on Sundays. He was a congregation builder and he inspired a wide variety of activities around which the gospel will be spread.

Here are a few examples. He inspired parish weekends where 150 to 200 parishioners would take a weekend in January at a location somewhere like Island Hall in Parksville.

[ 7 : 21 ] We listened to visiting Christian speakers connected in some way with Harry. These retreats offered wonderful teaching, good meals, quiet walks, skit nights, and did much to bond our congregation together.

The location was, of course, chosen by Harry so that any folks who might be somewhat uncomfortable attending a church retreat could tell their friends and neighbors they were off to Island Hall for the weekend. In the early days, he led several small group Bible studies himself and they became the forerunners of the many groups operating in this church today.

I am most familiar with the Wednesday morning men's Bible study which has recently marked 27 years of meeting together. This group of 20 to 30 men gather weekly for breakfast, fellowship, prayer, and Bible study.

Wednesday mornings became very important to Harry as he dealt with his retirement and some of the other issues in his life. Not content to stay within the boundaries of St. John's, he initiated and led a Bible teaching program called Faith in the Marketplace which met at noon on Wednesdays in the basement of Christ Church Cathedral.

These noon hour sessions had significant impact on the downtown business community. At times, attendance exceeded 100 persons. Faith in the Marketplace is still running today.

[ 8 : 43 ] He had connections internationally and our congregation benefited greatly from the sermons delivered from the pulpit from some of the world's foremost leading Christian figures. Of course, his connections within Regent College enriched St. John's immeasurably and our shared commitments with that institution has been a wonderful blessing to us both.

The list of Harry's innovations is long indeed and cannot be given their proper due. In a summary like this, however, the parish has engaged in many activities originally inspired by Harry's imagination and creativity.

Before I close, I must share with you a couple of examples of many that prove he had human failings just like the rest of us. Firstly, Harry and his eyeglasses were seldom together.

They were always in another jacket or on his desk or somewhere other than with him. As a result, he holds the world record for having delivered the most sermons with the aid of spectacles borrowed from others.

Secondly, and this is by no means a complete list, Harry always seemed to be running late except for his church services. Catching ferries, boarding planes or cruise ships, reconvening with a group of fellow travelers, he never seemed to be there as departure time neared.

[ 10 : 04 ] He was either very absorbed in other things, wandering off, or as I suspect, he was seeing how much adrenaline he could raise with his companions. I think it was the latter. As I conclude, I know that people who have encountered Harry along their life's journey will never forget him.

He was one of a kind. Working with him was at times most frustrating and at other times most rewarding. His love of the people he encountered each day was obvious.

His desire to share our Lord with them was his priority. When I learned that he had died on Main Island, I thought, how fitting. His place of refreshment during his active ministry and a haven of peace and rest in retirement.

Harry had built their Main Island home plank by plank with a little help from his family and friends. He and Fran shared their home with many who enjoyed their hospitality on the island. Their children and grandchildren will have lifetime memories of their family time spent there.

Harry was a wonderful preacher, pastor, and a good friend to many. We will miss him terribly but are confident that he has joined Fran, his lifelong partner and wife, and many others who have preceded him.

[ 11 : 15 ] God bless you, Harry, good and faithful servant. May you rest in peace. I've been asked to read a note from Wycliffe College in Toronto.

Merv mentioned that Harry graduated in 1955 with his Masters of Divinity. He was also awarded a doctorate from Wycliffe College in 1995 in recognition of his very significant contribution to the church.

So I'll read the note. On this sad and joyful day, Wycliffe College gives thanks to God for one of our great graduates.

Harry Robinson was one of the leading preachers of our time, a mentor to many young Christians, and an instrument of renewal through the Holy Spirit of several of the great evangelical parishes in this country.

You have gathered, brothers and sisters in Christ, who recall these gifts and his contribution. Many more throughout this country are with you in spirit.

[ 12 : 42 ] Be assured that this Lent and Eastertide, we are remembering him with thanksgiving in Founders Chapel, even as we hear again the news of the resurrection in whose hope Harry lived and in whose reality he is now with his Lord.

Principal George Sumner. It's my privilege now to lead us as we continue in the service.

If you would look in your service sheets, you'll find Psalm 84. And I would like that if we could read it responsibly. I'll read the first verse if you would respond.

Please be seated. From the bulletins that you have in your hands, Isaiah 6.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

[ 13 : 56 ] I very much wish that it was Harry preaching and not me. He would open this passage and he would go somewhere we would never imagine or even follow.

And then he would come at us sideways with great creativity and good humour. And just as you think you begin to understand, he would puncture the balloon and he would go after our pride and our pretense.

Then he would connect God's word to our deepest longings. And then lift us to see the glory of God and to draw us to Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, always Jesus, and enable us to see him in a fresh way.

And along the way, he would say things that none of the rest of us could ever get away with. He had a terrible habit of telling the truth without any fear of what you thought.

Truth about us, truth about himself, truth about the world, but most of all, truth about God. He would say it was such humility and such fire that we would begin to hear God's voice and no longer Harry's.

[15:19] He was a lion and a lamb. He was very at ease with children. He made them feel comfortable. But the pretentious and sophisticated, he made them feel distinctly uncomfortable.

He never lost his sense of wonder and curiosity. He was tender and he was tough. He was gentle and kindly to the bruised reed.

And he was provoked to indignation by pomposity, hypocrisy, and heartless religion in others, but particularly in himself.

He was unique. He was a big man. He had big hands, big heart, big virtues, big flaws, and he made a very big impact for God.

And he leaves a hole and he leaves a big legacy. Many of us here, as Merv said, first came to faith in Jesus Christ through hearing Harry's preaching. And he gave himself to the ministry of the gospel in a big way.

[16:32] extravagantly, stubbornly, and with remarkable effect. And he would have hated it if he knew how long I was speaking about him from the pulpit.

He loathed preachers at funerals going on and on about the person who died. He would say, it's not about them, it's about God. He would want me to describe him as a sinner saved by grace.

Big grace from a big God for a big sinner. And as we look at this reading in Isaiah chapter 6, it comes at a time of big loss.

The first words we read are, the king is dead. There's a sudden vacuum and change, a vulnerability. The future is uncertain for God's people.

Things are not going well. the vineyard of Israel is ravaged. It's been a time of unprecedented affluence in Israel, accompanied by a growing self-absorption and preoccupation.

[17:51] And there was corruption at every level. The people of Israel felt secure in their sins so long as they performed their rituals. And it is at this moment when the king dies that Isaiah sees the real king.

And there's a beauty and restraint in the language. But you can't avoid understanding that what Isaiah sees and hears is deeply threatening.

He sees a throne high and lifted up of authority and power beyond our manipulation. The throne of the one who holds the future.

And around the throne are seraphim. We're not sure exactly what they look like. Oh, there's a very good sculptor of one here. It comes from the word to set on fire, to burn.

And these heavenly creatures with six wings, despite their own burning brightness, have to cover their faces in the majesty and beauty of God.

[19:00] And one called to the other and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

Here are creatures who've been in the presence of God since creation, millions and millions of years. and what is at the heart and at the centre of their praise? What is it about God that just continues to intrigue and make them burst forward in wonder and praise?

It is the holiness of God. When we come to the very last book in the Bible and the Apostle John has the door of heaven opened, do you know what he hears?

Exactly the same song. Holy, holy, holy. If you and I were writing words for the seraph to sing, if you could choose one thing about God that you'd want to sing about for all eternity, what would it be?

It would be his love or his wisdom or his mercy. All of those are wondrous and true, but none of them have any meaning apart from his holiness.

[ 20 : 17 ] His holiness is the supreme truth about God. And the Hebrew scholars tell us it comes from the word cut or separate, exalted, above, superlative.

To see God in his holiness is to see the one who is beyond capacity to describe in beauty. He is the true light.

He is indescribably perfect. And in the Hebrew language that this was written in originally, when you want to say something is matchless and superlative, you repeat the word twice.

This is the only place in the Bible where we have a triple Hebrew repetition. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. He is beyond our human categories to grasp.

The beauty that energises all who see it, the loveliness that breaks the heart of these seraphims were, is life-giving and captivating because to say God is holy means to say there's nothing in him that's crooked.

[ 21 : 22 ] There's nothing in him that's distorted. You can't trifle with him, you can't complain against him, you can't avoid him, you can't ignore him. He is holy, holy, holy.

That is the supreme truth about God. And the thing about holiness holiness is that it's more about beauty than usefulness.

Holiness has no direct utility for us. Every other attribute of God we can use for our own advantage. God's wisdom means I can go to him and find direction.

His love means that I can feel comfort. His mercy means I can feel better about the wrong that I've done. But I cannot use or manipulate God's holiness for my benefit.

And the seraphim are worshipping him for the beauty of his holiness. Not because it's useful to them. Not because of the unbearable loveliness and fascination and splendour.

[ 22 : 29 ] And that is why it's so closely connected with glory here. The whole earth they sing is full of his glory. God's glory is the shining out of his inner holiness.

It is eternal. It is heavy. It is the weight of God. The weightiness of his holiness.

Some people want a God who is lighter than they are. Who fits around their ideas and agendas. But he has no power to change us. But the Holy One of Israel who is the source of constant glory.

To know him is to know the One who is infinitely heavier than you. Whose word is more weighty than yours. His holiness is his glory.

And the fact that it fills the whole earth means he's not a king in a corner. He's not confined to one place or one tribe or one tribe. The whole earth is full of his glory. And this was thoroughly shocking and distressing and overwhelming for Isaiah.

[ 23 : 41 ] He had been to the temple plenty of times before but the last person he'd expected to see was God. You see in verse five I said woe is me woe that's a curse word I'm lost I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King the Lord of hosts.

You might think if he saw God he would be happy happy happy but he says woe is me I'm ruined I'm unravelling I'm done.

And if you read through the Bible you find exactly the same response every time God appears in the Bible. When he comes down on Mount Sinai to give the Lord there's thunder and there's lightning and there's smoke and the people of Israel at the bottom of the mountain say to Moses you speak to God and we will listen but do not let God speak to us lest we die.

Do you remember when the disciples were in the boat with Jesus in the middle of a storm they were very afraid for their lives seasoned sailors. But when Jesus stood and calmed the storm with just a word it didn't make them relaxed and happy it made them more terrified than ever.

The rescue is more terrifying than the storm. Or the miraculous catch of fish when Jesus fills Peter's nets with fish.

[ 25 : 13 ] Peter isn't happy he says Jesus depart from me I'm a sinful man. It's only when we see the holiness of God that we begin to know who we really are and our excuses and our complaining fall at our feet in the light of his beauty.

What's doubly strange here is that Isaiah says I'm a man of unclean lips. I mean if there was anyone in Israel who had golden lips it was Isaiah.

He was an official prophet likely related to the royal family. He's one of the most creative brilliant artistic speakers. His book still read today and he's been prophesying for five chapters.

Isaiah's lips were his pride and his joy but in the presence of the true God in the presence of God's holiness Isaiah does not just need to repent of his sin he needs to repent of his righteousness.

The most holy thing we've ever done is full of mixed motives and pollution and we will never trust Christ for righteousness until we see his holiness and repent not just for our sin but for our self-righteousness.

[ 26 : 37 ] I think this was Harry's best ability to deflate our self-righteousness and I will tell you a story if you promise to keep it to yourselves.

It's a little bit naughty and it may offend some of you. Very early in his days at St John's he took the funeral of a prominent Vancouver person and the family delivered to Harry a long list of this man's achievements successes and righteous deeds printed on a piece of paper and Harry refused to read it but the family insisted that he read it and it went backwards and forwards until finally Harry relented and he stood here in this pulpit and he read the list and then he said do you know what it's worth now and he tore it to shreds I am undone but as soon as Isaiah sees it look at verse 6 one of the seraphim flew to me having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar and he touched my mouth and he said behold this has touched your lips your guilt has taken away your sin is atoned for this is wonderful this is not a moral transformation it's not turning over a new leaf

Isaiah is made into a completely new person he's cleansed he's forgiven he's purified his guilt is taken away it comes from God it comes from the altar the place where the blood was spilled the place of blood sacrifice where the holy fire of God alone can bring cleansing and atonement and forgiveness Isaiah he couldn't do this for himself we can't do this for ourselves he contributes nothing and it's not just his lips that need cleansing it's his guilt as well it's a beautiful picture of God's grace we can never ever really find God's grace or love until we are undone by his holiness is Isaiah had preached grace for five chapters but until now it was only an idea to him it was a concept but now he experiences and you and I can never be healed by the grace of God until we are bruised by the holiness of God without his holiness love is just sentiment grace is just indulgence but he does love and he does welcome and he does embrace as the

God of infinite beauty and majestic holiness and I think the question we ask as we finish is how do we hold these two things together how do we hold the holiness of God and the grace and kindness of God together and the answer is the person of Jesus Christ do you know in John's gospel John quotes Isaiah 6 and then he says amazingly Isaiah said these things because he saw Jesus glory and spoke of him 740 years after Isaiah died and Isaiah saw the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world for everyone to see the message of the New Testament is that the breathtaking glory and holiness of God has come into our world through Jesus

Christ and if we want to see the holiness of God on display we look at Jesus and if we want to understand and appreciate the grace of God we look at Jesus Christ Christ in his death and resurrection we see holiness and grace united most clearly he comes to die he comes to be the transforming fire from the altar for us he comes to be the altar as he is crucified on the cross as he absorbs God's wrath for our sin and our self righteousness God raises him from the dead taking away the guilt of all who trust in him Isaiah experienced only a shadow of what we have in Jesus the true king of glory and holiness Harry once said it was this that had really transformed him and made him a follower of Jesus in his early life he said it was the sheer beauty of Jesus

[ 31 : 44 ] Christ being crucified on the cross the blood the spit and the bruising he said there was something beautiful about him dealing with our sin and self righteousness wounded for our transgressions bruised for our iniquities the punishment that has brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed as Jesus dies God shakes the earth one more time and the rocks split and the curtain in the temple which was there to protect God's people from his holiness is torn in two from top to bottom not to let God out but to let us in and I don't think there could be any finer way for us to pay tribute to Harry than to receive what he always wanted us to receive to grasp that central driving force of his life the cross of Christ the place where God's holiness and his love come together in a place of glory and to come into

God's love through his holiness and to enter into his presence through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus on the cross to fill the earth with his glory Harry depart in peace and rest in Christ the Holy Lamb of God and now to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever and ever Amen Lord be with you please will you kneel or sit O Savior of the world who by thy cross and precious blood has redeemed us save us and help us we humbly beseech thee O Lord graciously look upon our afflictions pitifully behold the sorrows of our hearts make thy servants to be numbered with thy saints in glory everlasting I invite you to take

your leaflet and turn to that section where we're at the prayers to the song of Simeon Nunc Dimittis and please be prepared to join in praying this together in a few moments each of our prayers will contain the petition O Lord hear our prayer the congregation is invited to respond and let our cry come unto thee O Lord hear our prayer we begin with a prayer of

Soren Kierkegaard father in heaven well do we know that thou art everywhere present and that should anyone at this moment call upon thee from his bed of sickness or one in greater need upon the ocean cry out to thee or one in still greater need in sin that thou art near to hear him but thou art also in thy house where thy community is gathered together some perhaps flying from heavy thoughts or followed by heavy thoughts but some too coming from a quiet daily life of contentment and some perhaps with a satisfied longing hidden in a thankful heart enveloped in joyous thoughts yet all drawn by the desire to seek

God the friend of the thankful in the blessed trust consolation of the weak in strengthening communion refuge of the afflicted as thou dost count their tears last comfort for the dying as thou dost receive their souls so let thyself be found with a good gift to everyone who needs it that the happy may find courage to accept thy good gifts that the sorrowful may find courage to accept thy perfect gifts for to men there is a difference of joy and sorrow but for thee oh lord there is no difference in these things everything that comes from thee is a good and perfect gift oh lord hear our prayer oh god whose days are without end and whose mercies cannot be numbered make us we beseech thee deeply sensible of the shortness and uncertainty of human life and let thy holy spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days that when we shall have served thee in our generation we may be gathered unto our fathers having the testimony of a good conscience in the communion of the catholic church in the confidence of a certain faith in the comfort of a reasonable religious and holy hope in favor with thee our god and in perfect charity with all men grant this we beseech thee through jesus christ our lord o lord hear our prayer and let our cry come unto thee heavenly father whose blessed son jesus christ did weep at the grave of lazarus his friend look we beseech thee with compassion upon those who are now in sorrow and affliction comfort them o lord with thy gracious consolations make them to know that all things work together for good to them that love thee and grant them evermore sure trust and confidence in thy fatherly care through the same jesus christ o lord hear our prayer and we pray together the nunc dimittis the song of simeon lord now let us thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people to be a light to light in the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people

[ 39 : 31 ] Israel a poem by George Herbert love bade me welcome yet my soul drew back guilty of dust and sin but quick eyed love observing me grow slack from my first entrance in drew nearer to me sweetly questioning if I lacked anything a guest I answered worthy to be here love said you shall be he I the unkind ungrateful ah my dear I cannot look on thee love took my hand and smiling did reply who made the eyes but I truth Lord but I have marred them let my shame go where it doth deserve and know you not says love who bore the blame my dear then

I will serve you must sit down says love and taste my meat so I did sit and eat oh almighty god who willest to be glorified in thy saints and didst raise up thy servant Harry Shulto Douglas to shine as a light in this world shine we pray thee in our hearts that we also in our generation may show forth thy praises who has called us out of darkness into thy marvelous light through

Jesus Christ our Lord I invite you now to knit all these prayers together as we pray together this prayer which Jesus himself taught us our Father Lord of heaven I will be in God I will be in God I will be in God world you to you God I will Almighty God, with whom do live the spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord, and with whom the souls of the faithful are in joy and felicity, we praise and magnify thy glorious name for all thy servants who have committed their course and kept the faith, and committing our brother Harry to thy gracious keeping.

We pray that we with him and with all those that are departed in the true faith of thy holy name may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen. Well, on behalf of Harry's family and on behalf of the family of St. John's, I want to thank you all for coming to the service today and invite you to come immediately following the service to a time of gathering together in a reception in the Trendle Lounge.

[ 43 : 39 ] I'll also note on your bulletins there that there will be a collection of stories of Harry that are going to be gathered together and published, and you are all welcome to contribute to that, and there's an email address for that.

And now let's stand together and we'll sing our praises to the Almighty God. Amen. Amen.