***Charles Parsons***

Charles Parsons contributed to the life of the Diocese of Norwich in a number of ways. Many people will have met him because they were training for public ministry as Readers (now called licenced lay ministers) or ordinands. Within his benefice at Cringleford, he exercised a valued ministry as a Reader over many years and when illness prevented him from exercising public ministry in Sunday worship, he continued involvement in the life of the benefice in other ways. I felt immensely privileged that he asked to be licenced to me since he was exercising his Reader ministry mainly through the training work in the diocese.

Charles read music at Cambridge and then taught in a number of schools in Norfolk, eventually becoming a deputy head teacher. For a while, he taught at the City of Norwich school (CNS) from whose staff at least three people have become Readers.

Charles took early retirement from teaching and studied for an MA in systematic theology at King’s College London where he was much influenced by Professor Colin Gunton. He taught on the diocesan training course in its various forms for a good number of years. He was chiefly involved in teaching church history, doctrine and Old Testament. He is remembered as a teacher whom students could understand and engage with. He was very supportive of students who found academic study a challenge, especially if they were coming to university level study for the first time or if they had had a bad experience of education at school. He was a much-valued staff mentor for Reader students alongside his teaching commitments.

This support continued after Charles became too ill to teach. He would often meet students in the café at Sainsbury's on Queens Road to give them study skills advice. Latterly he had relocated these meetings to the café at Notcutts garden centre! In this way he helped numerous students overcome hurdles of writing essays and extracting information from books. He was generous in lending books to students and often turned up to lectures with bags of his own books to lend to people. In recent years the bags of books were joined by rather upmarket boxes of chocolate biscuits to share with the class during the coffee break. As to the books, Charles was realistic in what students could read in the time available and one of his well-known sayings was “Here are some books you can read in the next 30 years”.

In his heyday, Charles was a clear and compelling teacher. Because our classes are quite small, we often sit down to teach seminar style. When Charles got to something which he thought was so important the students really must take it on board, he would stand up for that part of the class. Charles standing up became a byword for something so significant that you have to give it your full attention. When the Parkinson's disease from which he suffered meant he could not stand at all, he would say to the class that they should imagine that he was standing up for the next bit!

In teaching church history, Charles was a fan of Richard III, whom he though got a bad press in church history books. He could remember dates and details that often defeated me when I was teaching doctrine or history with him, and I relied on him to fill in this information because I always knew that he would have it at hand in his memory. When I arrived in 2007, the students quickly dubbed me Charles II which made Charles Parsons into Charles I. The two of us reflected that I probably got the better deal since Charles I got beheaded and Charles II got Nell Gwynn!

When I first met Charles, he was suffering from Parkinson's Disease in its early stages, and it has been a great sadness to me to see his health deteriorate over the years that I have known him. I have memories of him going off to Cambridge to inspect theological colleges on behalf of what was then the Ministry Division. Latterly he has been walking with a stick and has found mobility increasingly difficult. Charles has certainly been somebody about who it can be said but he has borne his long illness with fortitude. One of the modules we taught together was about suffering and evil. We examined all the classic theological approaches to the problem of suffering where Charles was once again in full command of all the details about who said what and when. But we wanted to help students relate their own experiences to the doctrine we were studying, and Charles spoke movingly of how he coped with Parkinson's disease and with his other illnesses. God had used Charles’s increasing frailty as a means of grace to others. In this module we were at pains to point out that we should never say that something evil is good even if God works through it and turns it into a channel of grace. This, we were convinced, is part of the resurrection life. But you cannot have Easter day without Good Friday, and we should never say that something bad is good - we must name the bad thing for what it is, whether it is being unjustly treated at work or having to bear debilitating illness.

Charles bore his illness cheerfully. He was embarrassed by the effect of the Parkinson's disease and eventually declined to have lunch with everyone on study days because he did not want people to see him physically shaking while he was trying to eat. No amount of persuasion by myself and others would get him to change his mind on this. However, sometimes in class he would make light of this effect of Parkinson's, which I know in truth troubled him greatly. He would look around the class and apologise for shaking but then he would say “Actually I know that in fact it is all of you who are sitting there shaking and I am the only one in the room who is perfectly still.”.

While he was well read and thought deeply about theological matters, Charles was also very practical about how the Christian faith worked out. He was particularly interested in hymns and used to give talks to a great variety of groups about the history of hymns. This of course combined his music degree with his theology degree and gave him chance to show his love of both. I am told that while he was an undergraduate he conducted a small orchestra in Cambridge who were performing a difficult Strauss piece. Charles’ advice to the musicians was that so long as they began together and ended together what happened in the middle was less important!

Charles Parsons was a great colleague to teach with and a great support in the work we were doing in forming the next generation of lay and ordained ministers in this diocese and beyond. I missed seeing him and working with him during lockdown and was looking forward to him returning to having some involvement with the training work as lockdown lifted. He always encouraged students to carry on with their studies - indeed one student whom he encouraged in this way is now teaching the church history module which Charles once taught. He was also talking to me about going back to study himself and working towards a PhD. As we grieved to see Charles’ health deteriorate over many years, so now we are thankful that his suffering is ended. As the hymn puts it:

*The strife is o'er, the battle done;  
the victory of life is won;  
the song of triumph has begun.  
Alleluia!*

But we rejoice too at his encouragement, his service to others and all that we learned from him.

***Charles Read***

***LLM training co-ordinator & Deputy Warden of Readers***