

**EULOGY DELIVERED AT THE SERVICE  
OF THANKSGIVING,  
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On a murky morning in the autumn of 1976, I nervously entered a lecture room somewhere in the labyrinth of New College, Edinburgh, not knowing quite what to expect. I'd been persuaded to do a theology course to fill a gap in an arts degree. And the first lecturer was James Torrance. Bespectacled, in a tweed jacket, he was soon pacing the floor, New English Bible at his side, the blackboard awash with diagrams. I confess that much of what he said was lost on me — after all, I'd never really opened a Bible up to that point. But I was completely captivated. By two things. First, he seemed to be having the time of his life (which is more than I could say for a lot of the lecturers I'd encountered up until then). There seemed to be a steady heartbeat of joy. He had about him the aroma of a Feast that I knew I'd never been to, a great Banquet I'd not yet enjoyed. And the second thing that captivated me? The God he talked about seemed to be very hospitable and welcoming — a God of "grace" (he kept calling him), a God who longed for our friendship, a God who had done something momentous to make that friendship possible ("once and for all," he kept saying, puzzlingly).

Towards the end of the lecture, I couldn't help wondering: maybe these two things were connected. Maybe he had this joy because he actually *knew* this hospitable, welcoming God. He certainly seemed to be on pretty good terms with him. In fact he opened the lecture with a prayer. (What an odd thing to do in a University, I thought.)

I could never be the same again. Stepping out of that lecture room was the first step on my journey to a living faith.

And *joyful hospitality* was in so many ways the hallmark of his life. It was Alan, his son, who'd persuaded me to go and hear him. (I came to the Father



through the Son, in more ways than one.) And through Alan, invitations to Greenbank Crescent came thick and fast. But even without an invitation, I found a ready welcome there. Whatever the time of day, the door seemed permanently open. James and Mary embodied a kind of hospitality that I had simply never known before, eased along by endless cups of tea and carefully blended hot chocolate, served in front of a blazing gas fire and a rather overheated poodle called Louise. Whether in that warm-hearted house, or when bird-watching with him on the sands of Tynninghame, or strolling with him on his beloved Pentland Hills, he treated you with an utterly disarming generosity. As I struggled for faith, I assailed him with crass and clumsy questions; never once did he make me feel stupid or ignorant (even though I radiated both qualities in great measure). He gave me room to ask anything I wanted — because he had met a hospitable God who had made room for him.

An anecdote from those days says it all. One frosty day at Greenbank, the family were just about to give thanks before an enormous Christmas dinner when a tramp turned up on the doorstep asking if they could spare a sandwich. James immediately welcomed him in, sat him at his place at the table, presented him with his turkey dinner, then discreetly slipped out to the kitchen and cooked himself bacon and eggs. Why? Because he knew a hospitable God, who invites us to feast at his Table.

At that time he was Senior Lecturer in Christian Dogmatics at Edinburgh University. On the day he left, after sixteen years there, a packed Rainy Hall honoured him with tumultuous applause and a standing ovation. I joined him later as a divinity student in Aberdeen, where he was appointed a Professor. There was little doubt in our minds that the vibrancy of that place in the late 70s and 80s owed more to him than perhaps anyone else. You couldn't help but notice how students flocked to him from all over the world; how no one dared miss his lectures; how when he was Dean of the Faculty, he shunned all political posturing and secret, behind-the-scenes scheming, because all that mattered to him was the *open* secret of the gospel. Again at the heart of all this was a ministry of hospitality: the unforgettable generosity he and Mary showed in the granite grandeur of Don House, his legendary patience with stressed undergraduates, and with scores of postgraduates — theological travellers who had caught the Torrance magic from his lecture tours all over the USA, Canada and South Africa, and now had to be with the man himself. To all of us he opened his heart, because he knew a hospitable God whose very nature was to open his heart.

His hospitality was also ecumenical. There was no doubt about his passionate commitment to the Church of Scotland — he was a member of this Church for

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over 30 years, for a number of years Chair of the Church's Panel on Doctrine, and unswerving in his dedication to the Kirk in countless other ways. But that didn't stop him overseeing official conversations between the C of S and the Scottish Roman Catholic Church — in Belfast, he was as welcome in Catholic Seminaries as he was in Presbyterian Manses. Nor did it stop him representing his Church in intensive conversations with the Lutherans, and indeed the Anglicans — my own denomination. (Quite honestly, it feels very strange for me, a died-in-the-wool Anglican, to be giving this address in a setting so saturated with Scottish Presbyterianism. But then again, perhaps it's not quite so strange, when we recall James' passion for Church unity.) And why the ecumenical zeal? Because he believed that as the hospitable God welcomes us through the cross, so we must welcome each other.

Having said all this, there was nothing sentimental about James' hospitality. If he felt that the Good News was being compromised in any way, he would say so, and say so boldly. Who can forget that wide-eyed gaze of horror when he sensed that some vital piece of Christian truth had been mocked or sidelined — when he felt that the richness of trinitarian worship had been turned into a bland unitarianism, for example, or when he felt the political demands of God's grace were ignored? In visits to South Africa, he was fearless in highlighting just why apartheid was such an affront to God, with theologians and politicians alike. Once at a function in Edinburgh, he bumped into Alex Salmond, then leader of the SNP, and bluntly warned him the dangers of certain kinds of (what he called) "romantic nationalism." (He never did tell me Salmond's response.) And, of course, he was tireless in trying to disentangle Calvin from some brands of Calvinism, so concerned was he that the glorious covenant love of God would be turned into a deadening contract, so concerned was he that the Reformed tradition would be wrongly caricatured as legalistic, melancholic and fatalistic. Not everyone shared his views, of course. Sparks could fly. Many times he found himself attacked, often unjustly and often by people with half his erudition. And that would often hurt him deeply. But never once did I see him treat his opponents with anything other than grace, gentleness, forgiveness, patience. Why? Because he believed that's the way the hospitable God had treated him.

There was also nothing intellectually weak about his generosity. Here at Edinburgh, he gained a First in Philosophy, including a Senior Medal in Moral Philosophy, Logic and Metaphysics. Among his teachers was the eminent moral philosopher, Professor John Macmurray, who towards the end of his academic teaching life remarked to a colleague that James had been the most brilliant student he'd ever taught. (One of the last things Macmurray did was dictate a

reference for James, when he applied for the chair at Aberdeen — a tribute indeed.) A First in theology from New College followed, and then studies in Marburg, and later in Basel with Karl Barth, and further research in Oxford. With this kind of training it was hardly surprising that he pioneered critical work in the history of theology, not least Scottish theology, and hardly surprising that he could argue a case with astonishing power. But never once did he use his mind to hurt, or put down, or to show off — only to make God’s hospitality more accessible. At Invergowrie, where he was a parish minister for seven years, a church member once found out about his distinguished academic background. She famously remarked: “I never knew our minister was such a clever man . . . When you talk to him, you wouldn’t think he had a brain in his head!” He did of course have a brain, a formidable one, but he was a pastor first and foremost, and a pastor never uses his intelligence to dazzle, but only to turn the spotlight on the God who welcomes us unconditionally, whatever our intelligence. So at Aberdeen, to those who were terrified of entering the frightening mansion of systematic theology, he would, in effect, greet you at the door and delight in taking you into all its rooms, calming your fears. He’d introduce you to all his friends in that spacious residence: McLeod Campbell, Athanasius, Calvin, Duns Scotus, Andrew Murray. And if you didn’t understand something, almost instantly he’d make it crystal clear. With so many other teachers, you’d go into a class confused, and you’d come out realising your confusion had been much deeper than you first thought. With James, you’d go in confused, you’d come out inspired. Needless anxieties were dissolved by a memorable story from parish life, a lucid diagram, or a simple phrase you could take away and chew over (simple, but never simplistic). Of course, that cost him a lot of intellectual work behind the scenes. But you didn’t know that. As that woman at Invergowrie found out, he didn’t want you to know he was clever, he wanted you to know the welcoming, hospitable God whom he knew, the trinitarian God of grace. In short, *here was a man who lived and breathed what he believed.*

As a father, he embodied the unconditional love of the triune God he knew in his heart. As his daughter Marion told me the other day, when he forgave you, he not only forgave, he forgot as well.

As a grandfather to seven boys (no less!), he embodied a kind of relaxed playfulness that comes easily when you know you really are forgiven, and you can “let go.”

As a teacher, he gave us a vision of what theology could be — not something to be stored away in some dusty attic of the intellect, but something to be lived

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out in everything you do and are. Head and heart, mind and will, together. *He lived and breathed what he believed.*

And because of that, he inspired literally thousands. Many, of course, hoped that he would write more. Yes, thankfully, there are many articles. And a few years ago a book appeared, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, a book which encapsulates so much of what made James tick. And then there are the Warfield Lectures, still to come in print. Even so, many longed for a larger legacy of writing. Fair enough. But surely his greatest legacy are the people he inspired, and that's a legacy you can never put between the pages of a book, a legacy that will reverberate down the generations long after we've gone. In one place, Paul writes to the Corinthians: "we don't need letters of recommendation . . . *you are* my letters of recommendation." If you want to see James' letters of recommendation, you don't need to go to words on a page. Go and meet the teachers all over the world who found their vocation through his example, many of them in prestigious academic and Church posts — his own son Alan, inspiring scores of students at St Andrews; and so many others, in Cambridge, Seattle, Vancouver, Montreal, South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Mississippi, California, Cape Town, New Zealand, Australia — and, yes, I could go on. Go and meet the woman I bumped into in Atlanta earlier this week who told me: "James made me believe that I did have a brain and I could teach the gospel, when everyone else told me I didn't stand a chance" — she's now teaching in a major Christian University. Go to the hundreds of ministers who found through him that they did have something to preach after all. And, not least, go to the likes of that man James bumped into on Newport Beach, California (so memorably evoked in his book); the man who'd drifted away from the Church, and whose wife lay terminally ill at home, but who heard through this open-hearted Scottish minister in swimming trunks that God did not condemn him, but that Christ was praying for him in his agony and desolation and could offer an enduring hope. He insisted James came and prayed with her at her bedside, and later wrote to James to say he and his wife had spent their last days abiding in the love of God, and that she was now — in *his* words — "safe in the arms of Jesus." Go and meet the likes of people like that and you will see James' greatest legacy, a legacy beyond price.

And on the day he died, he was still at it — inspiring. Only hours before he passed into glory, he spent an hour with his grandson, Andrew, sharing with him the best news in earth or heaven, news of the Father's welcome, news of the Son's dying and rising, news of the Spirit's empowering, news of divine generous hospitality. What an hour that must have been.

And it was, of course, James' radical, huge-hearted generosity that made his memorable habits all the more endearing. The way in which so often after lunch, his digestive system would overwhelm his ability to stay awake. The frantic grasping at the various pockets of his blue jacket to locate that ever-elusive pair of glasses. His fascination with alarm clocks (multiple alarm clocks), fed by his anxiety about getting to places on time. All wonderfully unself-conscious habits — but then, someone so mastered by the grace of God doesn't really have time to be that self-conscious.

Of course, I know that nothing that I've said this morning is going to remove the ache of loss that so many of us feel. And none will feel it more than Mary, with whom James enjoyed almost fifty years of marriage. James used to insist over and over again that we find out who we really are in relation to others, as we are loved and as we love in return. I wonder if there is any married couple for whom that could be more true.

Also we know that for Alan, Heather and Marion and their families, and for Tom, Grace, Margaret and David, and their families, these will be very poignant days, when gratitude for this extraordinary man is going to be pierced many times by a sense of absence, a sense of a great light having gone out.

But we also know that if James could speak to us now, he would want to assure us

— that the God whom he knew, is not "a God out there somewhere" (as he used to say), but a God who comes to meet us in the human High Priest, Jesus Christ;

— that in him the darkness we now know has already been vanquished and daybreak is assured;

— that the heavy sorrow we carry has already been felt and borne by him, and will one day give way to singing, when the hospitable God will finally welcome us, as he has welcomed James, to his eternal Feast.