

Tessa Blackburn 1939 - 2003

From Fr Neil Kelley

It is a huge privilege to be asked to write something about the life of Tessa Blackburn. I am very much aware that others knew her far better than me and for a lot longer.

No one could forget meeting Tessa. She certainly made an impression on all those who came in contact with her. She was a colourful character with a heart of gold.

Whether it concerned art, politics, music, an issue of social justice or injustice, Tessa was never short of something to say and was therefore an excellent guest at any dinner party as well as a brilliant hostess herself. I remember many occasions sitting around the table in Homefield Road where one met people from so many walks of life – Life's Rich Tapestry !

Tessa's life, like so many, had more than its fair share of ups and downs. She was devastated, as were we all, by her daughter Camilla's death in 2000. Only a few years prior to that she had proudly walked her daughter Olivia up the aisle at St Nicholas 's when Olivia married Vivian Enever.

At Tessa's 60th Birthday Concert in Chiswick the whole audience (some 300+ friends) joined together to sing the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's Messiah. (No presents – donations to charity.) How appropriate that at the end of her Funeral Mass everyone sang the same piece ! It was a right and fitting tribute to a truly colourful Life.

Tessa made many friends and her interests were wide and varied. In her 'spare time' since retirement from Kew Gardens she travelled up and down the country, as a volunteer for New Bridge, the charity of which she became Vice President, visiting people in prison who otherwise wouldn't have been visited. She often championed the cause of the underdog. She had no time for sitting on the fence. Judgement was not a word in her vocabulary. She lived her Christian faith in all she did and her kindness to her friends cannot be measured. Cancer got the better of her but it didn't stop her passion for life.

And now a piece of that rich tapestry has gone. In Tessa the Christian Church, and the world at large, had a gem. May she rest in peace.

From Liz Crocker

Much will have been written about Tessa – all of it true. It's impossible to exaggerate what a lovely person she was. To meet her was to love her. In her last months with love and admiration we watched her dignified pilgrimage towards death. Sister Patricia said on hearing of Tessa's death 'Alleluia'.

From Christabel Ames-Lewis

It is still hard to realise that we will not meet Tessa coming round the corner or see her striding ahead up the High Road. We want her to be there. She was, as one magazine reader put it to me, 'a joy to everyone'.

With Tessa's death a light has gone out. She was quite literally an inspiration, fortifier, empathetic friend and delight to all who met her. What will we at St Nicholas's remember about her? The sound of her voice, her memorable reading of the lessons, her devoted administration of the Sacrament, her warmth, her energy, her snappy one-liners. She connected us up together, drawing us into the centre of things. One could see this in the way she welcomed newcomers, greeted old friends and encouraged so many of us to share in the ministry of readers in church.

She enhanced others' experience of life and met head on whatever life threw at her.. When she had to face the terrible blow of her daughter, Camilla's death she didn't crumple, despite its heavy toll on her. She was positive in adversity, optimistic about what was possible, bracing to the faint hearted, demanding of herself. She helped others face their difficulties. There will be many who will long remember her visits to them in prison as a lifeline.

When I say she was woven into the fabric of our family, I know I speak not just for us but for countless families for whom she was very special. She was a staunch supporter of our children – finding a job for one of them during her time at Kew Gardens, as for several other lucky young people, going to concerts our daughter sang in, always asking after them all – and she shared our joys and sorrows. It was Tessa, our son Orlando said, who made him feel safe when his bother Marcus died, who made him believe that life would be all right again. She knew how to help.

No doubt others will say more about Tessa's many activities, her wit, her range of interests, her love of the arts. I'll end with our eldest son's tribute: 'I will greatly miss Tessa's smile, enthusiasm for life and her hat collection. Her death is terribly sad but I feel privileged and lucky to have known her for as long as I have'.