

Address by Peter Everington at the funeral of William Conner

Church of St Michael and All Angels, Chiswick, London

December 11th 1997

In Bill Conner's Bible this Psalm [67] we have just read is underlined where it says 'on earth', 'all nations', and 'all the peoples'. Above the heading, with his familiar flourish, Bill has written 'World Concept'.

The writer of the Psalm must have been well acquainted with the nationalities of his day, from people he met on the trade routes through Palestine. He would have been aware of neighboring military powers that could crush the fragile people of Abraham, Moses and Jacob. Yet he dared to break into this song about a 'liberating power among all nations'.

The friend whose life we celebrate today was, at various times, familiar with Rabat, Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi, Alexandria, Cairo, Riyadh, Amman, Jerusalem, Beirut, Damascus, Istanbul, Baghdad, Kuwait, and Tehran. His war service was in what we here call the Middle East, and he was a tank commander at El Alamein, one of the decisive battles of World War Two. He was in and out of the region for the rest of his life. Everywhere he carried this same message of outrageous hope, that there is a liberating power available for all nations.

During the Battle of El Alamein Bill himself found a fresh liberation from fear - the fear of death, the fear of what other people might think. Some weeks after, one night under the desert stars, he promised his Maker that if he ever got back home, he would give the rest of his life for a different kind of world. For one thing, it would be a world where the European powers found an idea that united them, instead of projecting their conflicts onto areas like Africa and the Middle East.

When he did get home, there were lucrative positions open to a Cambridge graduate with a good record in a cavalry regiment. Bill married Chérie, who had the same outlook, and together they passed up these opportunities. Instead one of the first things they did together was to go to Germany with a large MRA team, offering the hope of a renewed democracy through the kind of spiritual change they had themselves experienced.

Towards the end of his life Bill said, 'I feel I've served in two elite corps - the 8th Hussars and Moral Re-Armament'. A recent book by a Washington think-tank says that MRA did in fact play a decisive role in post-war reconciliation, on the ground in Germany and France, and also at the Caux conferences in Switzerland. Bill and Chérie helped to service Mountain House Caux from its opening as a Centre in 1946 and during the summer months for the next 48 years. For the whole of their married life they had no salary, living in the faith that where the Almighty guides, he also provides. And it worked. I know that the family and all of us are grateful that the Swiss President of the Caux Foundation and his wife have come specially to London for this occasion.

We are here to honour a man with many God-given qualities. Yet Bill was aware there were many

qualities he lacked. For one thing, by his own admission, he had next to no appreciation of music or art. He was mystified as well as deeply gratified to have a son and a daughter with great artistic gifts that he knew did not come from him. 'It must be Chérie's side,' he would say. So much of what we are celebrating today, in terms of achievement and an attractive quality of living, was and is Chérie. And how very proud and fond he was of his children and grandchildren.

To Bill, music was a well-tuned car engine, especially if it was a 1927 Alvis 12/50, such as he owned as a student at Cambridge. Art was a rugby ball skillfully hooked from the scrum (Bill was a hooker) and passing down a line of three-quarters, especially if they represented Cambridge or Wasps, Ireland or England. With the supremacy of the All Blacks, his New Zealand son-in-law provided him with a continual exercise in mortification at the rugby level. So one feels that the score line at Twickenham last Saturday and Tuesday was in part due to Bill's biased intercessions. [England drew with the All Blacks, then Cambridge beat Oxford.]

And how good it is to think that he can now see again, everyone and everything.

Messages have come to Chérie, Patrick and Judi from all round this country, and from New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, USA, Jordan, several from Egypt, and other countries. Here is one from Sweden, signed by 14 people, one of them an Egyptian:

'With much gratitude for Bill our thoughts go to you these days. He was a humble Englishman with a great sense of humour, a pillar of faith and perseverance, a true friend in whom you could confide, who saw the needs and tried to help each one to face the truth and find the answer through a real contact with the Almighty. His passion for the individuals and nations to find a true destiny focused on the Middle East and Egypt. His persistent care for the Middle East will certainly have left a permanent mark on many lives. What he has sown will ripen to a rich harvest. He will be missed by us all.'

For many of us in this church and many beyond, Bill had the quality of a great encourager. He was a devotee of Andrew Murray's book *Waiting on God*. Through the morning quiet time and the habit of listening at any time of day, he believed that, whoever you were, you could be touched by what he sometimes called 'The Presence'. You could receive specific thoughts for other people and situations, as well as a liberating power at the depth of your own nature. This was the source of his vision and compassion for individuals - whether you were a student or an Air Vice-Marshal.

While Bill and Chérie were working in Bristol, Bill did go and visit an Air Vice-Marshal he had never met before. The man was retired and felt his public service was over. Bill found him feeding his chickens. He became convinced of the work Bill was in, and wanted to be part of it too. A few years later they went to see King Faisal of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh together, on a tour of six Middle East countries.

If Bill had served in those two elite corps, he also felt he had worked under two outstanding leaders, Montgomery of the Eighth Army, and Buchman the initiator of MRA. From both of them, with their different styles, he learned that however lowly you are in the enterprise, or feel you are, everything could depend on you.

It was this which galvanized Bill, as an ordinary citizen with no official status, to take responsibility for the issues in the Middle East where Britain had been historically involved, and to play his part.

Archbishop Makarios wrote a letter of thanks for the help Bill and his colleagues gave towards the Cyprus agreement of 1959 at crucial moments. It was Bill who had taken Makarios's main adviser Rossides to meet the British Prime Minister Macmillan at 10 Downing Street.

Bill felt keenly the plight of the peoples of the Holy Land. The Jews had suffered unspeakably from the anti-Semitism of Europe, and the Palestinians had also paid a terrible price. The trauma of both had to be addressed by the policy makers of the West. Justice and peace had to be laboured for, and this he did.

At a deeper level the 'liberating power among all nations' which the Jewish Psalmist sang of needed to become a reality in the lives of leaders and ordinary people, not least in the West. That is unfinished business, as in Cyprus, left to other courageous people to work for.

Egypt was his earliest love in that region. It was there that he first understood the working of the One God in the lives of Muslims. For ever after he felt as a Christian that there was a common task to be undertaken with people of the Muslim faith and other faiths. A message has come from a former leader of the Labour movement in Egypt, acknowledging how Bill helped him to reaffirm faith and absolute moral values rather than class struggle as the basis of true socialism for his people.

After the debacle of Britain's invasion of Suez in 1956, Bill with many others felt that the honour of the UK needed to be redeemed. One result was that, with a number of friends who knew and loved the Middle East, he started a programme of student exchange visits between British students and the leadership of the Egyptian student unions. The idea was that the decision makers of the future should learn to respect the spiritual aspirations of the other culture, while living out what they themselves most deeply believe. From a modest beginning that work blossomed into an educational charity, the British-Arab University Association, whose work has since extended to Jordan, Sudan, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority.

In the recounting of all this, Bill would wish us to say a hasty 'Praise be to God'. He came to feel he was better without human praise, as something you could easily take or seek for yourself instead of redirecting it to the Almighty. In some cases perhaps he was sparing of praise to others, as he could be sparing of demonstrated emotion. He was curious about the modern footballer, who when he scores a goal flings himself into the arms of his comrades. 'In my day,' he said, 'if you'd scored a goal you'd walk back to the half way line alone with your head down, as if the whole thing had been a mistake.'

One of his family describes him as a warrior throughout his life, an upbeat warrior, in a life to which there was a considerable cost. He himself sometimes talked of 'an experience of the Cross', a mystical concept but one which, if it results in the re-giving of your whole life to the Almighty, is comprehensible to people of all traditions.

This morning a fax arrived from a Muslim architect in Cairo. Many years ago at Cairo University she was the one who, from the Egyptian side, initiated the student exchange programme. She writes

this prayer:

‘Oh Lord, may Your Heavens open their gates to your sincere and devout worshipper William Conner who firmly believed in You, trusted You and obeyed Your guidance throughout his life on earth. May his soul rest in peace. May his family and friends be consoled by Your Grace and Mercy. May the memories of his life on earth, his enthusiasm, wisdom and vision be light-posts in the path of faith and unity of believers around the world for generations to come. May God bless those who followed his example and those whom he trained to continue his work for the world. May God bless his soul and grant him the reward he deserved for his belief and righteous deeds. Amen.’

Bill was grateful for the fellowship of Father Morris and this church, which I am sure we would all like to echo, with our thanks also to Chérie, Patrick, Judi and their families for their generosity to us today as always.

As we give this final salute to a cavalryman of the old school, a warrior with a modern touch, and commend him with his qualities and his frailties to the Everlasting Mercy, we can sum up his life in an Arabic phrase:

‘Wallahi rajul - My God, what a man!’