

Funeral – Zoë Peterssen

It was said of St George, the patron saint of this country, that he was one of those whose names are justly revered...but whose actions are known only to God, and there have been moments when I wondered whether it would be possible to say more about the woman whose funeral we are conducting now. Zoë was someone known by sight to a large number of people, but even those who managed to engage her in conversation found that she became generally elusive when asked for details about herself and her life. She seems to have sought anonymity to an unusual degree, becoming indeed a mystery wrapped in an enigma. (Or *vice versa*.)

It was only when those of us at Pusey House were faced with supplying details about her to a doctor, a hospital and a registrar that we realized just how little we could say with certainty. Zoë Peterssen – yes that was the name by which she wished to be known. But was it her real name? Well, I imagine everyone here knew her as Zoë, so it's right to leave that matter there.

Then there was the other frequently asked question – where had she come from? On this point speculation flourished vigorously, assisted, I suspect, by Zoë herself. As a result she was considered either Norwegian or Polish or Hungarian or almost any eastern European native you could imagine. In her last illness she assured the doctor that she was Swiss.

It was only when we had the task of clearing her room after her death that pieces of her life's jigsaw began to emerge and be fitted together. She had not destroyed the evidence, so there can be no harm now in revealing the truth. In fact she came from the Lebanon. That discovery led to others which supported snippets of personal information which she had given to different people. We had already known that her background was academic, and to some of our students here she had revealed that her training was in economics. That certainly was confirmed by what we found in her room, but it was only part of the story. We have discovered since her death that she studied at the American University in Beirut, where she was the first woman to obtain a Master's degree in Business Administration. That was in 1958.

Then there was the fact that some people could remember her studying in the University here. That too we have confirmed. Earlier this year she told me that she wanted me to know she had written her doctoral thesis but not submitted it. Again there is evidence to support this. Certainly she had been a member of St Hugh's College. What's more she published some learned articles in her field.

But the mysteries remain. What had she done between her time at the American University and studying at St Hugh's, where they last heard of her in 1972? We don't know. Nor do we know anything about her family. It seems clear that she was a

Lebanese Christian, but attempts to enquire of her about her family were always firmly cut short. Accounts received from those who met her have suggested that she came from a wealthy family, that she was very close to her father and that she was sent to Europe for schooling, possibly to Lausanne. But clearly there was some deep and painful rupture between her and her relations. A while ago I asked her to leave a list of family names to be contacted in the event of her illness or death, but I knew I was facing a stone wall. No, she wanted no contact with them. No, they were not to know where she lived.

All this brings us to the fundamental question. Here was someone of great intelligence and ability, someone whom surviving photographs show as a young woman of striking appearance and stylish in dress, someone who was pursuing academic research here, and yet who suddenly cut herself off from all this. Why? Why did she adopt a new *persona* as Zoë Peterssen, the artist we saw drawing trees, the writer of poetry and of larger works reflecting on the wonder of existence? I doubt we will ever discover the full truth of that part of her story, but those of us here today, and others who would have liked to be here, have in many cases every reason to be thankful that she took this singular course in life.

Life – that was the meaning of her name, Zoë. And if you engaged her in conversation (or if, more likely, she engaged *you* in conversation, because she was choosy) you discovered that it was awareness of the glory of LIFE, of existing and

being surrounded by living things, which so much animated who she was and what she did. Animals, stones and, above all, *trees*, were a source of peace-giving and healing power to her, and it was something of this healing sense that she conveyed to others through her art and through her vision.

It has been said that the purpose of art is to get us out of a lazy way of seeing. In that case, Zoë was an artist indeed. I imagine that most of us will agree that after seeing Zoë's drawings we've never looked at trees in the same way again. She and I used to have a regular appointment on Tuesday mornings, and she would always bring with her leaves which she had found in Christ Church Meadow or the University Parks or elsewhere. She mounted these on sheets of coloured paper. And once more her seeing eye was evident, because the paper was always of a colour which enhanced the tints in the particular leaf, so that I had to pause and marvel. There again was part of her gift – to make you aware of the staggering glory which is all about us and which we are usually too hurried to look at. She would bring stones as well, often brought out of a heap of garden chippings like lifting diamonds from rubble, showing me unexpected textures and colours in them.

Trees, though, were her delight above all else. Nearly every tree she saw had a distinct character for her, and she often bestowed personal names on them. Heaven knows how many hours she spent drawing them in such a way as to bring out the personality she discerned. Can we ever separate our memories

of Zoë from those huge rolls of paper she carried? It was a common joke that she began by drawing a tree almost life size. But then came further hours when she began to reduce the drawing on a photocopier until she achieved an image of almost Japanese clarity which she could turn into a framed picture or a card. Those she sold, of course, and I suspect sold astutely, because the shrewd economist was still alive in her.

We are fortunate to possess a number of her original drawings here. Perhaps I should explain that in 2004, after renting guest rooms week by week in different colleges, Zoë arrived here. She stayed for a week, then left. Soon after she was back again, and the length of her staying increased every time until she became a permanent resident, on the understanding that nobody was to know where she lived.

She seemed happy here, and rewarded us by donating pictures of trees which had a connection with important people in the history of Pusey House. Little by little she revealed another talent, a gift for flower arranging. Every Sunday in term she would arrange flowers by the statue of Our Lady, which is why we've made sure there are flowers there today. Then flowers appeared on the staircases. Finally I did have to remonstrate when flowers and flower vases threatened to take over the entire top floor of the House. She also seemed to think that we were in constant danger of starvation, because biscuits appeared for the residents in prodigal quantities. Likewise, if we asked her to bring (for example) a few basil leaves for

cooking we could be sure that a large bush would appear in the kitchen. "Zoë," I said on one occasion, "we only wanted something small." She smiled and said, "I don't do small."

On an occasion such as this the anecdotes could go on endlessly, and many of you will have your own stories of why Zoë meant something special to you. It has become clear to us since her death just how much and how deeply she touched the lives of individuals. Somehow, people wandering in the parks or the meadows and feeling uncertain or simply overwhelmed by the pace and complexity of their lives would find themselves talking with her, and sometimes just a few words from her woke them up to the richness of life which they were in danger of overlooking or forgetting.

The word "spiritual" is widely misused today, but with Zoë it is necessary because who she was and what she did rested on her wish to be rooted in the Spirit of God which fills but also transcends our everyday concerns.

I said that she was almost certainly a Lebanese Christian, which makes it so fitting for us to be bidding her farewell in a Christian service in the place where she lived. But there is more to it than that. After her death we found some notes which she had been making during this past year, notes reflecting on what we must call the state of her soul. Clearly a kind of inner darkness was disturbing her and she was anxious about some unspecified future trouble. The most recent notes

make sad reading because she was clearly resisting the awareness that she was becoming seriously ill. She was enduring increasingly severe pain, yet she would tell nobody.

heaven.

The striking thing is that these notes reveal the depth of her religious faith. Every day she asks that God will give her strength to endure what is coming, or she thanks God for a day when the pain has been less. Furthermore, she says again and again how much she depends upon the help of the Holy Angels, and how close she feels them to be. It is appropriate that her funeral is taking place on the day after the Church celebrated the feast of St Michael and the other Angels and Archangels. And in the end, when there was no alternative to being taken to hospital, she had what she desired - a room to herself for her last week in this world. In hospital she was well cared for and kept out of pain.

But we must not end on a sad note. That would not be Christian. For many people Zoë did and said things which nobody else could have done. She was not the proverbial plaster saint. She had her clear dislikes as well as her likes. But she touched many lives for the better and permanently. Her good works follow her. Her ashes will be buried under her favourite tree in the grounds of St John's College where she often worked. We now commit her, as we do every Christian soul, to the infinite love and mercy of God, to whom her life and all its mysteries are fully known. May light perpetual shine upon her, with angels and Archangels and all the company of