

Margaret Rosenthal

When I first heard of the Wheatley Society I had recently moved into the village from the rather self-contained world of College Close. The Society offered me the opportunity to get to know a wider group of Wheatley residents and I have enjoyed many of the events organised by the committee over the years. My main interest has been the Local History group initiated by Mary Hodges and owing much to her professional expertise. I remember particularly the preparation for our entry for the local history competition organized by the Oxfordshire Community Council in 1980. Many enthusiastic workers co-operated, including members of the Environmental group, and when our display on the history of the High Street was displayed in Oxford Town Hall we were very proud to be awarded a prize. The group has continued to work at less glamorous tasks and has built up a collections of records, now housed in Wheatley Library, which sheds light on history that would otherwise have been lost. Our series of exhibitions has aroused interest in many Wheatley people.

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#### MARGARET ROSENTHAL

I first met Margaret Rosenthal when I was a student teacher at Lady Spencer-Churchill College of Education, in 1967, and she was Head of the English Department. Since that time, she has become an influential friend and mentor. I wanted to know more about her life before I met her.

Margaret Rosenthal was born in Small Heath, Birmingham, on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1915. At that time her father, George David Rosenthal, was Priest-in-Charge of St Gregory's Church, but shortly after, he became Vicar of St Agatha's Church, Sparkbrook, a large Anglo-Catholic church, built in 1901 to replace an inner city church. He was involved with a group of priests, inspired by the Revd. Basil Jellicoe, who were actively involved in pioneering work to provide decent housing for the poor.

Margaret's Grandfather had been brought up in a Jewish family in Lithuania, and originally the family name had been Bar-banel. (This was changed to Rosenthal for diplomatic reasons, as a result of the German invasion of Lithuania). There is an oak chair in St Mary's Church, Wheatley, which was originally given to her Grandfather, the Revd. Michael Rosenthal, in 1883, by 'converts from Judaism' in his London parish, and given by Margaret to St Mary's.

Her brother, Michael, was born in 1919. He was not as scholarly as Margaret, but he was a keen sportsman. When he left school he went to work as a trainee at Harrods. He joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and, when war broke out, he went into the signals department of the Royal Navy, and rose to become a lieutenant. Whilst on a signalling course he met Molly Wilson, whom he married in 1945. Despite being shipwrecked, he returned home safely after the war and spent a year at the London School of Economics before returning to pursue his career at Harrods. Molly and Michael had two sons, David and Mark.

When she was still quite young, Margaret remembers being told by her father, that he had 'seen a saint' on the platform of a London station! This was Edward King, Bishop of Lincoln who, although not officially a saint, is recognised by the Church of England, and he is particularly remembered on 8<sup>th</sup> March. When Margaret came to Wheatley, in the 1970s she was astonished to discover that this 'saint' had been assistant curate at St Mary's, Wheatley, from 1855-1858. She began to research into the work that he had done for the poor of the village and, later, in the diocese of Lincoln.

Between 1927-1933, Margaret attended King Edward's High School for girls, in Birmingham, where she was greatly encouraged by the Headmistress, Miss Barrie. From there she won a scholarship to read English at Lady Margaret Hall, in Oxford.

Before going up to Oxford, she spent six months as a 'bonne' with a family in Paris, who wanted her to

speak English with their children. Margaret remembers that, because the father was a senior civil servant, there was usually a sentry at the door of the building!

In 1934 Margaret went up to Oxford to read English at Lady Margaret Hall, when Miss Grier was Principal. Margaret's tutors were Janet Spens, a writer and editor; and Kate Lea, whom Margaret remembers as being 'very good at relationships', and who later became an external examiner in English at Lady Spencer-Churchill College of Education. Margaret sang in the college Choral Society, and regularly attended services in the College chapel. She also explored some of the city churches, particularly those with an Anglo-Catholic ethos such as St Margaret's, St Mary Magdalene, and St Barnabas.

Margaret Rosenthal's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday Sermon  
30 October 2005

'I believe in the communion of saints...' these words from the Apostles' Creed used to be very familiar. When I first became aware of them, I thought they were connected with the Holy Communion but eventually I learned that they describe that fellowship which Christ left to his church and which St Paul referred to in the passage we have heard from his letter to the Thessalonians, when he speaks of God who 'called us into his kingdom and glory.'

This day is a day of thanksgiving for me and I want to say how grateful I am for all the friendship and support I have found here. This is obviously no time or place to speak of individuals but I want now to speak briefly of some members of the fellowship who have meant a great deal to me although I can only know them through hearsay or the power of the written word. First a little story of a woman who did what no doubt seemed a small kindness, and who was quite unaware of what it would mean to a stranger.

During the Second World War my cousin, was a Chaplain in the R.A.F. Like countless others, his war was not a matter of spectacular deeds but of patiently and cheerfully making the best of things. After a long period of service in the Far East, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. As a result he was sent on what must have been a nightmare journey, by train and by ship, from Calcutta to a hospital near Johannesburg. On arrival there he was, as he puts it in a journal of reminiscences, rolled out on a bed in the sick bay. He had not heard from his family for weeks and he was lying there as lonely and bereft as it was possible to be, when the Ward Sister brought him a letter. He did not know anyone in South Africa, but in his weakened condition, the emotional experience was so great that it was some time before he felt able to open it. When he did, he found it was from a lady who represented a group in her church who ministered to, and cared for, the sick. They had heard about him and wanted him to know that they would be remembering him, and if there was anything they could do to help, he had only to let them know.

'Suddenly,' he writes, 'the arms of the Church went round me and I never again felt friendless and alone, the whole time I was there.'

The writer of that letter little knew what solace she would bring, to an unknown member of Christ's church, at a time of great need.

Now we take a long journey across time and space - from the heat of Africa to a small community on the windswept coast of Northumbria, in the seventh century. In the lands of a monastery, a child was born to Christian parents and, with prophetic insight, they called him 'Bede' - which means prayer.

When he was seven years old, his parents confided him to the care of the Abbot of the nearby monastery. Today the child himself, or his friends, might resent their action, but Bede remained in that austere but kindly home for the rest of his life - and it proved to be a place which suited him perfectly. Looking back

over more than sixty years, he described his experiences in a few sentences: 'I have spent the remainder of my life in this monastery....and while I have observed the regular discipline and sung the choir offices daily in church, my chief delight has always been in study, teaching, and writing.'

Bede's main study was the scriptures: he wrote a great number of commentaries on various books of the Bible, some lives of the saints, some hymns, and a book on the Art of Poetry, and on his deathbed he was busy translating St John's Gospel into Old English.

But the book for which he was most famous was, 'The Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People'. This book is the source of much that we know about the early years of the Christian Church in England. My copy of this book, in the Penguin series, was first printed in 1953 and, by 1968 it had been reprinted 18 times. Many readers besides myself have benefited from his careful scholarship and gift of bringing facts to life. He was not a scholar withdrawn in an ivory tower: a letter written at the time of his death demonstrates how dearly he was loved by his brothers. Over the centuries many people, including myself, have been grateful to him.

A shorter journey takes us to Norwich in East Anglia, where a remarkable woman lived: we know her as Lady Julian. She was called to the life of a 'solitary', spending her days in a small dwelling which she vowed never to leave. In her thirties she prayed for something very few would have the courage to ask: 'I wanted,' she wrote, 'with my own eyes, to see and know more of the physical suffering of our Saviour, and the compassion of those who there and then were loving him.' Her wish was granted and, in a series of visions, she was shown in vivid detail the agonising events of Good Friday. Afterwards she pondered on what she had seen, and she wrote of many conversations she had with Christ. Her story might suggest that her conclusions would be gloomy and guilt-ridden - but, no, they show homely and warm love for her fellow Christians.

On one occasion she asked Christ the question that bewilders so many of us: 'Why do people suffer so much?' He replied: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' After her death, Lady Julian's book was forgotten for 500 years but was rediscovered in the nineteenth century. It has been a source of inspiration ever since. I, for one, am very grateful for what she has taught me.

I wish there was time to talk about George Herbert - that priest-poet who gave us two of the hymns we are using in this service today, and a body of deeply spiritual poetry but, speaking in this church, I cannot omit Edward King who spent the first years of his ministry among the poverty-stricken village of Wheatley 150 years ago, and where he learned to love Christ's poor. A friend wrote of him, 'It was light he carried with him; light that shone through him.'

I love to think of Edward King moving in our own muddy streets and going from poverty-stricken families to the stables where he made friends with the hard-worked stable boys - carrying that light with him, as he carried it to Cuddesdon, the University of Oxford and, eventually, into his diocese of Lincoln, and even into the cells of condemned prisoners.

I have tried to suggest some ways the saints can help us on our way. On Tuesday it will be All Saints' Day and I will end with words from the ancient collect for that day - words which I am sure my father said in his church in Birmingham, three days after my birth:

*Almighty God, -whose people are knit together in one holy Church, the body of Christ our Lord: Grant us grace to follow your blessed saints in lives of faith and commitment, and to know the inexpressible joys you have prepared for those who love you; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Revd. Rosenthal died, still in his post at St Agatha's, in 1938. After this Margaret's mother, Elizabeth, daughter of a Birmingham GP, moved to a small house in Cambridge, quite close to her sister. She learned to type and worked as a secretary to supplement the family income. This was the home to which Margaret would return during school holidays.

When she went down from Oxford, in 1937, Margaret took a teaching post at Varndean Girls' Grammar School in Brighton, where she taught mainly English, but also some French. When war was declared, children were moved from London, to what was then considered to be a 'safer' location on the south coast. The two schools shared the Varndean facilities for half a day each: one school used the buildings in the morning- and the other in the afternoon!

Very soon it became apparent that Varndean was also 'at risk' and, in 1940, the school, with about 200 girls and ten staff, was evacuated to Holmfirth, in Yorkshire, where they shared premises with Holmfirth Girls Grammar School - half a day each. This was certainly an extraordinary experience for a young teacher, but Margaret accepted it as 'doing what one could for the war effort!'

For the last three years of the war, Margaret taught at Bradford Girls' Grammar School. During this time, a large number of families were re-located from London to Yorkshire - to escape the buzz-bombs.

In September 1945, Margaret moved south again to take up a post at Christ's Hospital School in Hertford, where she remained for 10 years. This was the girls' school, of course, and a long way from the boys who had moved to Horsham in 1902. (The girls did not follow until the 1990s) The Christian ethos of Christ's Hospital made a lasting impression, and greatly influenced Margaret's future direction.

For a short time, Margaret was Headmistress of the Grove School in Hindhead, a small day/boarding school, which had moved to Sussex from Hampstead. This was not a suitable position: the school finances were in a poor state and there were no academic values.

In 1960, she was delighted to be offered the opportunity to run the English Department at Bletchley College. This was an emergency teacher training college, established after the war in the premises previously occupied by the Enigma Project, and here too, the ethos of the College had a profound effect upon her.

In 1965 the teacher training college was removed to purpose-built accommodation at Wheatley, near Oxford (now known as the Wheatley Campus of Oxford Brookes University). Although there were many advantages in this new location, it involved uprooting Margaret's mother from her own home in Woburn Sands, to live in staff accommodation in College Close. Margaret and her mother attended St Mary's Church in Wheatley, and Margaret began her growing commitment to the service of the Church.

Shortly after her mother died, in 1971, Margaret bought her own house in Farm Close Road, Wheatley, and she retired from teaching in 1975. It was around this time that she became extremely active in the Wheatley Society - researching local archives for the History Group. She spent a great deal of time and energy transcribing the records of Wheatley Primary School, and some of the papers relating to the ownership of Wheatley Windmill. In recognition of the value of her work, she was made President of the Wheatley Society in 2001.

Encouraged by the Revd. John Selby, who was a non-stipendiary minister in the parish, and Ms Elizabeth Suter, who was Head Deaconess at the time, Margaret began to train as a Lay Reader (now known as a Lay-Minister) in the Church of England, and was licensed in 1982. One of her special duties was as an official School Visitor for the Council of Education, and this involved visiting many of the Church Schools in the Diocese. As a result of one of these visits, she was invited to preach at the Primary School's Harvest Festival service, in Kirtlington Parish Church. This was the start of a significant preaching career.

The Revd. Michael Farthing, who was the vicar of Wheatley at the time when Margaret was licensed, warmly supported her work as a Lay-Minister. As it happens, a second woman came to work within the Parish: Angela Butler, a deaconess, was appointed in place of a curate. Together Margaret and Angela helped to break down much of the prejudice against women. Angela was later ordained as a priest - one of the first group of women to be accepted as a priest within the Church of England.

After her licensing, Margaret frequently led the Sunday evening services in St Mary's Church, and regularly preached the sermon on these occasions. Mr John Battershell, who lived in Wheatley at that time, was also a licensed Lay-Minister, and together they shared many church duties.

Since then, Margaret has preached regularly in the parishes of Wheatley, Forest Hill and Stanton- St-John. She approaches her sermon at the beginning of the week, engaging with the readings for the following Sunday and making a few notes. She continues to think about them for a couple of days, before starting to write down her ideas (by hand) on Thursday and/or Friday. On Saturday, she reads her sermon aloud and times it - making any necessary alterations as a result of this. Over the years, she reckons she must have prepared and delivered well over 300 sermons!

Margaret sincerely believes that 'there was an overall plan' for her life, and has no regrets about the way things have worked out for her. She remembers, with much affection, the family holidays in a small cottage on the coast of North Wales and, much later, holidays spent walking and sightseeing in Switzerland, Italy and Greece.

Reading has been her greatest delight and relaxation. She has read widely and prided herself in keeping up to date with new literature - although she admits that, as she grows older, she prefers re-reading the old classics, and the poetry of Shakespeare, Henry Vaughan, and George Herbert.

The Liturgy of the Church has always been central to Margaret's life. Now in her late eighties, she still attends the daily services of Matins, and the Wednesday Eucharist, in addition to the Sunday services. She reads the gospel at the Sunday Eucharist, organises the rota of readers and intercession leaders, and, in 1991 she wrote a short history of St Mary's Church. She summarises her life in the words of the Venerable Bede:

**while I have observed the regular discipline and sung the choir offices daily in church, my chief delight has always been in study, teaching and writing'.**

Susan Prest  
September 2003