

## **The Revd Canon Anna Ruth Matthews 1978-2023**

Obituary, Church Times, 24 March 2023

*The Revd Dr Andrew Davison writes:*

MINISTRY is not a competition, but, in marking the death of Canon Anna Matthews, the fact remains to be stated that she was among the ablest priests of her generation, whether in preaching, pastoral care, organisation, or formation. She became Vicar of St Bene't's, Cambridge, in 2012, at the age of only 34, and also "half-time" Diocesan Director of Ordinands. Dioceses with fewer ordinands had a full-time DDO, and sometimes an assistant, but St Bene't's was no sinecure. Anna was devoted to the cure of souls.

Alongside the flourishing diocesan post, Anna threw herself into old-fashioned parochial work: she got to know her congregation, drew alongside those who were suffering, and welcomed arrivals. She worked with a burgeoning team of servers, priests, and ordinands to produce what could justly be called "exemplary" liturgy, at the non-fussy end of Anglo-Catholicism. Inclusion was a priority, and she let the parish know that the church was there for everyone. Local businesses, for instance, were prayed for in turn. (I cannot confirm the claim that the lingerie shop was saved for a Sunday when someone particularly unlikely featured on the rota of intercessors.)

The congregation grew, and, in 2019, Anna was appointed Vicar full-time. The church was reaching capacity. Just before the pandemic, discussions began about needing a third Sunday mass. Always serious about theology, she held regular study days (not least on the Bible, which was always a priority for her). These have recently grown into the Resourcing Faith programme, in co-operation with Little St Mary's. The millennium celebrations of St Bene't's, planned for 2020, were postponed by the pandemic, but were eventually marked: belatedly, but in style.

Anna, the eldest of three girls, was born in Yorkshire, but much of her childhood was spent in County Durham, for which she had an enduring affection. She went up to Cambridge to read theology and religious studies at Robinson College (1996-99). After a year as pastoral assistant at King's College, London, she administered language training at the Foreign Office (herself an able linguist), arranging tuition for diplomats before their postings.

She was introduced to Stephen, her future husband, by her friend John Hughes, later Dean of Chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge ([Obituary, 11 July 2014](#)). Stephen's career in development and education reflected her own

commitments, while his appointment as a theology teacher at the Anglican-Roman Catholic school in Cambridge reflected their inter-Church relationship. She and Stephen were married in the middle of her two years' training at Westcott House, from which she received a Cambridge M.Phil. She was ordained deacon in 2003, and priest in 2004, serving her title at Abbots Langley.

Anna was a sought-after speaker, especially on liturgy and the sacrament of confession, for which — alongside spiritual direction — she was a persuasive advocate. The impact of her sermons has been much discussed, after her sudden and unexpected death at the age of 44.

Gregarious, and yet deeply private, Anna was as much at home throwing dinner parties (as an accomplished and adventurous cook) as she was on silent retreat. She was devoted to Ignatian spirituality. Stays at St Beuno's, the Jesuit retreat house in Wales, often for a week or more at a time, were a lifeline amid the demands of parish life. She also read enormous numbers of novels, which, no doubt, contributed to her pastoral perceptiveness.

The wish of so many that she might one day take up an episcopal post (ideally soon) genuinely horrified her. Perhaps the Almighty would have prevailed, but few who knew her would doubt that any archangel sent on that commission might have come off the worse from the encounter. Behind that reticence, certainly, lay disappointment at a sense that the centre of the Church of England was wandering from theological roots and pastoral work as a priority. Much about the spirit of Church of England policy dispirited her, whereas the parish (or a cathedral, as her years as Minor Canon and Precentor at St Albans were among her happiest) offered a coalface away from "nonsense". But more was at play in that diffidence.

Alongside a deep humility (her canonry at Ely Cathedral, for instance, was simply never mentioned) lay an incapacity to recognise in herself the gifts that others saw in her so abundantly, or to show towards herself anything like the depths of love that others felt for her.

Her legacy, as she would have wished, is not to be measured in church titles, or in books written, but in lives turned to God's light. Dying so young, she leaves an influence as immense as her loss is now unfathomable.

*Canon Anna Matthews died on 8 March, aged 44.*

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/24-march/gazette/obituaries/obituary-canon-anna-matthews>