

## **Michael Ramsey**

Michael Ramsey was born into an academic family in Cambridge, where his father was a lecturer in mathematics and his mother taught – taught when she wasn't demonstrating or addressing meetings on women's rights. His father was a Congregationalist and that was his upbringing. His early schooling was a little haphazard and not awfully successful, ranging from local dames' schools to a boarding school where he was dreadfully homesick. It wasn't until he was admitted to Repton that he began to develop his own character. He was never going to become a cricketer, finding himself unable to concentrate long enough to catch the ball, but he did find himself able to hold the attention of a room full of people who hung on to his every word as a speaker. He passed from Repton to Magdalene College Cambridge, following in his much loved brother's footsteps.

It was during his time at Cambridge that his religious convictions were confirmed and changed from his Congregationalist roots to Anglo Catholicism. He was ordained and his first curacy was in Liverpool where he met with a certain amount of distrust from his superiors and yet whenever he took a Service it was bound to be packed by working class parishioners and students who came just to hear him preach. Then, from Liverpool to Lincoln where his main task was as lecturer to future ordinands. Finally he was made Canon at Durham and Professor of Divinity at Durham University. Durham was to become his love and where he was the happiest. I did ask around for people who had studied under him and what they thought of him. One student said they would try to test him by asking the most obscure questions and yet he always managed to beat the students with simple and yet deep answers. The story goes that whilst crossing the quadrangle at Durham a student – late as usual for his lecture – bumped into him. Ramsey's papers were scattered everywhere. "Oh my God," said the student. "No", came the reply, "Just his representative on earth". That must be a bit apocryphal, but does give us a little hint of Ramsey's ready humour. I was also told that he was incredibly disorganised and needed his wife Joan to keep him tidy. Whilst in Liverpool, having forgotten his key, he returned to his lodgings and knocked on the door. His landlady, not opening the door called out "Ramsey's out." "Never mind," said Ramsey. "I'll come back later".

From the academic life of Durham followed first his installation as Bishop of Durham and from there he was installed as Archbishop of York, which brought with it some opposition as he was still noted as being Anglo Catholic. He did however receive doctorates of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities – Oxford for his academic work and Cambridge for his ecumenicism. Five years later came his election as Archbishop of Canterbury

which was amongst one of the strangest of selections that has been. Firstly, Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher did not like Michael Ramsey – or rather to be fair to him it was more that he did not like the fact he was Anglo Catholic. He advised Harold Macmillan against his appointment but Harold Macmillan wanted to make up his own mind and insisted on meeting him which he did and immediately decided that Ramsey should take the position. What made it strange was that the Queen was about to leave the country on a tour and Macmillan telephoned her with his approval and the whole appointment was done over the 'phone. Geoffrey Fisher was not pleased. However, the installation went ahead and the Installation speech which he gave covered the reformed nature of the Catholic Church, condemnation of racism and the desire the state should give more liberty to the Church and also the pleasure at the growing longing within the Church for a deeper life of prayer. This speech was received very well.

When, finally, Michael Ramsey was installed, and for some time after, Geoffrey Fisher would send Ramsey little notes – things he should do and things he shouldn't. One day Ramsey got his own back. He went missing. He couldn't be found, his wife didn't know where he was, neither did his chaplain nor his secretary. Finally just before lunch, up rolled his little Morris Minor, out stepped Ramsey with a broad smile on his face. Finally out came the story – he had been to Madam Tussauds where they had measured him and taken all the details. Yes, he was going to have a place in Madam Tussauds – but what was the thing which pleased him the most – they would have to melt down the model of Geoffrey Fisher.

Michael Ramsey had the profound gift of the great educator, that of imparting knowledge without appearing to teach and preaching without turning doctrine into dictate. He was, in turns funny and endearing, compassionate and moved to tears by injustice and cruelty. His charm and rhetoric ensured that any debate was a masterpiece of intellect and profound thought. But above all, he was a humble man. A man who still wore gaiters when they were more than old fashioned but whose thinking was never antiquated. He had radical positive beliefs concerning homosexuals and women in church and foresaw the inevitability of women in the episcopate.

So this is a short picture of Michael Ramsey – the man, but what is the legacy which Michael Ramsey has left? Firstly, he has left a pile of good readable books, which are still used at colleges and places of learning. And prayer. For him prayer and the world in which we live cannot be separated – to live is

to pray. He was once asked how long he prayed each day – the reply came back – two minutes, but it takes me 28 minutes to get there.

Quoting from his book, "Be Still and Know", which is one of his incredibly readable books, he says on prayer:

"To be with God for a space. Within this may be included every aspect of prayer which the textbooks have described. To be with God is wondering, that is adoration. To be with God gratefully, that is thanksgiving. To be with God ashamed, that is contrition. To be with God with others on the heart that is intercession. The secret is the quest of God's presence "Thy face Lord will I seek"

But, of course, Michael Ramsey will always be best known as an ecumenicist. The joining together of all faiths. This did not make him popular. He was hated by the government because he went into the Eastern Communist States at a time when they were struggling with Russian oppression. He went to Russia at the time when the cold war was at its height and wow did he clash with the church of Ireland.

When first he met with the Pope there were difficulties because they couldn't agree on several issues, family planning being one. And although he was very willing to recognise the Pope as chief of a United Church he was never willing to call him the Head of the Church because Christ alone is the Head of the Church. However, he persevered and it was with great joy that progress was made. Michael Ramsey went to Rome and was met by the Pope. After a private session they progressed to The Church Outside the Walls. Here they stopped and although Ramsey's chaplain knew what was to happen, Ramsey did not. The Pope asked Michael to take off his ring, which at first he did not want to do, but after a little gentle coaxing, he did and his amazement was unbelievable, when the Pope removed his own ring – the one he had been given as Archbishop of Milan. Ramsey was overcome and his entourage had to shield him from the press etc. as he cried with emotion. However, the Pope was able to come to his help with his own handkerchief pulled from his pocket. That ring was worn by Michael Ramsey most of his time left to him and when he died he was found to be wearing it still. It was later worn by Archbishop Runcie.

In 1970, after celebrating the 800 years of the death of Thomas a Beckett, he became great friends with Cardinal Heenan. They met together officially and socially and were very much on Christian name terms.

In 1982 when Pope John Paul II visited Canterbury he went along the line of Anglican Bishops standing to welcome him, kissing each in greeting. The congregation sat in silence until he got to Michael Ramsey and then there was an outburst of clapping. They embraced for so long that one paper said it was like two old folks who have been happily married for 40 years.

Michael Ramsey became very unpopular with Ireland who rejected his Anglo Catholic principles and thought he was drawing too close to the Roman Catholics in Ireland. He upset many when he said - long before David Jenkins - that it was perfectly possible to be a good Christian whilst not accepting the virgin birth. Paisley refused to shake hands with him because he had walked and talked with the Pope and when Michael Ramsey suggested there should be more multi-faith schools this created a mass of arguments.

Michael Ramsey's greatest sorrow was that even though there had been many meetings with the Methodists, no lasting agreements had been made. Most of the problems arose over ordinations and those previously ordained and after much discussion in 1972 a final vote was taken and the schemes lost. He always felt that this was the biggest failure of his life.

After his retirement, Michael Ramsey returned to Durham where he was recognised and grew to be loved in so many ways. He died on 23 April 1988 and was cremated. He had always wanted to be buried near to William Temple. As he had been cremated this was not possible and a compromise was reached with the following plaque nearby:

"With thanksgiving, pray for the soul of Arthur Michael Ramsey 1904-88  
Archbishop of Canterbury 1961-1974, scholar, priest and friend.

The glory of God is the living man and the life of man is the vision of God."

To finish, I would like to use the prayer Michael Ramsey wrote, which he called, "While reading St John's Gospel":

Lord Jesus, as I read the Gospel of your disciple, show me what I shall hear and receive and do. Make this Gospel a living word to me. Come Holy Spirit help me as I read the Gospel story to know the presence of Jesus. Come Holy Spirit warm my heart, stir my imagination, open my eyes, that I may see Jesus and hear his words and be ready to do what he wills. Amen.