

Sally Fraser, the Pastoral Assistant, from St Mary's, Leith reflecting on the 10th anniversary of Mgr David Gemmell's death.

Lifted high in a very large pair of hands

Cherish 'the sacrament of the present moment,' **SALLY FRASER** says



BY SALLY FRASER

AS I write this, I am preparing to sing *On Eagles' Wings* as the psalm at a service on Wednesday, although I have a bit of a sore throat so it might be a slightly Janis Joplin-esque rendition. I remember the first time I encountered that hymn, and indeed that concept. The beautiful refrain I had not heard before invoking a God who I hadn't particularly heard of before, one who will raise us up, bear us on the breath of dawn (whatever that means, it sounds nice) and hold us in the palm of His hand. It was a taster evening for the choir at St Mary's Cathedral, in the hall complex behind the church, and I had gone along, having been to Mass a couple of times and gently wanting to dip my toes in a little deeper.

Afterwards, there was a bit of a social, a glass of wine or two. I wasn't particularly up for chatting but one of the priests came to talk to me. He was bigger than I imagined a priest would be, and very warm and human and generally not like a story-book or film priest.

He was telling me that apparently eagles do lift baby eagles on their wings—they have some kind of hooking action where they can scoop them up, and some kind of in-wing accommodation for carrying them. And he said that was the hymn he wanted at his funeral. So, regardless of the state my vocal chords will be singing it to mark 10 years since he died.

Because that priest was Mgr David Gemmell, and none of us knew back then

just how quickly his funeral was going to happen and that we would all be there. A whole city, it felt like, united in grief. Everyone you knew sad at the same time, a seemingly impossibly large number of people feeling like they had lost a friend, someone they were close to, and someone who had a huge impact on their lives and Faith journeys.

Ivery much came into the Catholic Church under the guidance of Mgr David and Fr Hugh Purcell too, and I will always be grateful for the time and patience those men gave me, allowing a life to be transformed from a slightly lonely, precarious existence of bad decisions and bad boyfriends to one settled in a community, stable, engaged to marry someone who was actually nice.

So many of us converted then. When I was initially unsure I was simply told to 'live freely,' that God didn't mind whether I was a Catholic or Protestant. Mgr David said he had converts coming out of his ears, that they were just walking in off the street. He told me it was the Holy Spirit that converted people; all he had to do was 'not get in the road.' These were such new ways of thinking to me.

The response which came has held me safe through many a dark time

I think about this all the time now that I work in a church, this view of ministry as standing aside, letting the Spirit do the work, the constant vigilance required to simply not get in the road. Removing obstacles where necessary, remaining open to encounters, being a friendly face and ear—on the road but not getting in it.

And being present to each other. At the beginning of Lent 10 years ago, Mgr David

Eagles scoop up their young and carry them on their wings, just as the Scripture says

encouraged us all to celebrate what he called 'the sacrament of the present moment.' Poignantly and heart-breakingly, he would die before that Lent was over, making his words an all-the-more urgent instruction to all of us forever, staying with us.

But of all the things Mgr David said and did, for me there is one moment which stands out more than any other, one which conveyed more than epic tomes of theology books or complicated explanations ever could. It was one of those reconciliation services where everyone lines up to make confessions, unsure how far away to stand from the person in front, like waiting at the cash machine.

I didn't know what to say but Mgr David took my little hands in his enormous squashy ones (like boxing gloves, my husband once noted).

We had been told we could think of something we lacked rather than something we had done, so I said I lacked Faith. I lacked Faith in God, and sometimes I didn't even believe that He was really there. The response which came has held me safe through many a dark time and will doubtlessly do so through many more to come: "I wouldnae worry about that darlin'. He knows you're there."

I have read and heard that we will be remembered for how much we have loved, and that people will remember how we made them feel, not what we ever did for them. And all these things are probably true. But there is something else too, we will be remembered for how much we have revealed to people of what God is like. I am sure so very many of us remember Mgr David for what he showed us about how we are loved, how we are and will be welcomed, and how we are held in the palm of a (very large) hand.

■ Sally Fraser is a pastoral associate at St Mary's Star of the Sea in Leith, Edinburgh. She converted to Catholicism in her 20s and is married with two small children