

**Memorial for Graeme Lee MacDonald**  
**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour**  
**Mill Valley, California**

**Friday, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

**The Rev. Richard E. Helmer p/BSG, officiant**

It could be said that this parish collects characters. Perhaps that could be said for the church around the world and across the ages. From Jesus' rag tag band of fishermen, tax collectors, and otherwise unattached folk to us two thousand years later, God clearly calls the unusual and the unexpected. Graeme was most certainly one of these – unusual and unexpected as all of you knew him. He was kind, good-humored, and thoughtful. He was also complicated. He would often sit at the very back of the church many Sundays, jot a few notes on my sermon, slip out before the peace, and then shoot me an email about it later in the day. He would show up on occasion for worship in his kilt, flying the clan colors and proud of 'em. And he had an opinion for everything, it seemed, often tempered with a wry grin or joke. So my first more in-depth encounter with Graeme after I first came to this parish was over the dust he kicked up when we started discussing the place of the American Flag in this house of worship. I remember one of the old patriarchs of the parish, Bart, coming up to me shortly after that episode that included at least one bracing public email from Graeme. Bart was a good friend of Graeme's, and he was chuckling as he approached me. His chuckle which blended sympathy with good humor said "Welcome to Church of Our Saviour" and, of course, "Now you're getting to know our Graeme." This Graeme who was courageous enough to die for a friend or his family was also the Graeme who, if he disagreed with you, would let you know it in no uncertain terms. The flags stayed put. I learned a lot from the experience. Yes, Graeme was and remains a character's character.

Over the past few years, I had the privilege of getting to know the Graeme so many of you knew – a man who deeply loved people, his family, his heritage, a good football game and his alma mater. He had little time or energy to suffer foolishness, and yet he showed gentleness in this house to those who were most vulnerable or in need. He was not a man particularly enamored by the church's rituals, but he enjoyed a rigorous sermon and would gladly usher so that he could hear the choir that he loved sing. . .so that he could help one of our esteemed elders to the rail. . . so that he could chat with the people he had grown up with, gotten to know, and loved. In his last days, I was struck at how a prayer or the sacrament would lift his spirits and bring him strength. Graeme, I discovered in what is probably no surprise to many of you, was not about frills or false piety. It turned out he always had his eye on the ball – on what really mattered in life.

Most of us were amazed at his extraordinary courage these past two years. "Team Mac" as he called it became his prayer and cheering squad. And as he struggled mightily against a foe that would likely intimidate the rest of us, he provided witness to the indomitable depths of the human spirit and an inspirational love of life. Graeme taught me in the way he would spin his stories that even in the darkest of hours, good humor can be like a beacon: a star to steer by. Among my favorites was his remarkably unscientific discovery that chemotherapy might well be the most effective mosquito repellent ever. It

was told with that same dry wit that he always told his stories about himself, his family, or the wider community he cherished.

When at last Graeme surrendered – he had fought the good fight – he appreciated the sense in which we, the community that he loved, was praying and loving him into the “end zone.” It was a testament to his strength of character that he stuck around long enough to have one last party with his friends at the Bohemian Club. Graeme found that remarkably elusive balance between surrendering to death and accepting it with a dignity where he insisted on accepting it only on his terms. I was struck by the peace that brought him – a peace he left with us as a parting gift.

Graeme didn't appear to me to struggle too mightily with some of the questions that might linger – about why a man still in his prime is taken from life, or what kind of a God would allow such a dear friend to suffer such a hard battle with cancer. It is those cosmic questions that we might take into the readings today and encounter a God who transcends death and suffering, who accepts – without resorting to easy answers or simplistic explanations – our sometimes angry, sometimes bewildered questions about the fragility of this life, who embraces our vulnerability in the same way Graeme embraced so many of us – like a longtime friend, a loyal compatriot, a passionately devoted father, brother, and countryman; that shepherd with us through the valley of the shadow of death offering comfort and hope.

Graeme's God, our God, Jesus tells us in the gospel this day is the host of a house with many rooms, many dwelling places. Jesus' Way reflected in Graeme's own unique, characteristic fashion is not found in a book or distilled into doctrine, but is rather lived in the ups and downs of relationships; it unfolds in the context of generous hospitality. Graeme showed us that life is indeed “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines.” Perhaps our only challenge is that we all too often claim that we are too busy to stop and partake. Graeme refused to fall into that trap. What a great witness to all of us. Without him the world is a far less interesting place. Perhaps that calls us all to take up his work of making it more interesting again together.

It is a good and beautiful thing to part with our mortal coil surrounded by loving family and an immeasurable bounty of friends. It was good for Graeme, and your presence here today, filling this house to overflowing, says to me it was good for you, too. Good enough now to celebrate a life well lived? Maybe, but then I have hunch “good enough” rarely sat all that well with Graeme.

So I offer to you this musing I had around the time of his death. I wondered how Graeme would have responded if Jesus had shown up at his door. My guess is that Graeme would have invited him to join him for a drink at the Bohemian Club. My guess is that Jesus would have said yes. I suppose now that Christ has invited Graeme for a drink at God's table. My guess is that Graeme has probably said yes. Wouldn't you agree? The hope that Graeme leaves with us is that this life is only a foretaste of the banquet that awaits us all. Now *that's* good enough for Graeme. That yes to life that was and remains Graeme's, the inescapable and wondrous choice that shapes all of our journeys. . . and leads us home.