Sermon for the Requiem Eucharist for All Souls Carlisle Cathedral
Sunday 1st November 2026 Michael Everitt

One of the most famous poems in the English language is from our diocese. Inspired by a walk with his sister Dorothy in April 1802 "beyond Gowbarrow park" on a gusty day as Dorothy noted in her Grasmere Journal on the 15th of April "The Bays were stormy and we heard the waves at different distances and in the middle of the water like the Sea." William Wordsworth in 1804 wrote "I wandered lonely as a Cloud." Initially published in 1807 in Poems in Two Volumes and revised in 1815. Byron and others were dismissive, but Turner in 1819 is inspired to paint the very view of Ullswater and by the time of his death in 1850 it is recognised as "very exquisite." For reasons of connection with this place, I quote the 1815 version with its celestial second verse.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Clergy housing is a lottery. On every appointment bar one I have not seen the house beforehand. There are often restrictions on what can be done. A rule in interior design is the first room to be looked at should be the garden, as it is the one you always gaze upon. Sometimes the garden has been wonderfully tended, the soil structure here is testimony to previous occupants' hard work. Other times it is a mixture of wilderness or a total blank canvas.

One such blank campus was the chaplain's accommodation for St Martin's College, former married quarters for Bowerham barracks in Lancaster it had been a house for three students and all its garden turned to turf. Daffodils would be nice at the front to relieve the battered brick wall. Hundreds of bulbs were duly purchased and then the reality of needing to plant them hit home.

In conversation with a mature student, he commented that he had worked for a municipal park prior to his studies and so we commissioned him to plant them. This he duly did, at the correct depth and en masse. It was only when they came into leaf and then bud that it was clear what his role in the park and cemetery division was. There in our front garden were three distinct shapes, narrow at foot and head with straight lines in an expanded diamond shape. Three perfect coffinlike shapes of daffodils greeted us on the arrival to our home. (Their shape only visible from upstairs and within two years naturalization had lessened the impact.) "In the midst of life, we are in death."

Ted Hughes was also inspired by Daffodils. And in a similar way there are two versions of his poem Daffodils, one published in 1998 in Birthday letters. This one on St David's Day (London review of books in 1984. Both inspired by a particular memory of picking the flowers with his wife, Sylvia Plath in the spring before her suicide in 1963.

I'd bought a bit of wild ground.
In March it surprised me. Suddenly I saw what I owned.
A cauldron of daffodils, boiling gently.

It was a gilding of the Deeds – treasure trove!
Daffodils just came. And they kept on coming –

'Blown foam,' I wrote. 'Vessels of light!'
They ran under every gust
On the earth-surge, 'their six-bladed screws
Churning the greeny yellows
Out of the hard, over-wintered chlorophyl.'

I was still a nomad.
My life was still a raid. The earth was booty.
I knew I'd live forever. I had not learned
What a fleeting glance of the everlasting
Daffodils are. I did not recognise
The nuptial flight of the rarest ephemera –
My own days!
Hardly more body than a hallucination!
A dream of gifts – opening their wrappers for me!

I thought they were a windfall. I picked them. And I sold them.

Behind the rainy curtains of that green April
I became intimate
With the soft shrieks
Of the jostled stems – the wet shocks, shaken,
Of the girlish dance-frocks –
Fresh-opened Dragonflies, wet and flimsy –

To each bright, scared look
I brought gentler cruelty. A thousand times
Slid my fingers down her slenderness
Felt deep into her chilly fountain of blades –
The watery flicker she peered from,
And nipped her off close to the bulb.

I piled their frailty lights on a carpenter's bench,
Distributed leaves among the dozens
(The buckling blade-leaves, limber, groping for air, zinc-silvered).
Propped their raw butts in bucket water
(Their oval, meaty butts)
And sold them, sevenpence a bunch. The whole lot went.
Yet they stayed. That night, on my pillow,
My brain was a chandelier of daffodils!

Dressed for Heaven,
Wings pouring light, faces bowed,
The souls of all those daffodils, as I killed them,
Had taken refuge inside me –

I could see right into their flame-stillness
Like seeing right into the eye-pupil
Of a person fast asleep, as if I'd lifted the eyelid –

I could study
That scarf of papery crinkle, fawn and perfunctory, at their throats,
And the tissue of their lips. I learned
That what had looked like a taffeta knot, undone
And re-tied looser, crumpled,
Was actually membrane of solid light.

And that their metals were odourless
More a deep-grave stoniness, a cleanness of stone,
As if ice had a breath –

They began to alarm me. Were these
My free girls, my Saturnalian nunnery,
With their bloomers of scrambled egg-yolk, their flounces,
Their core alive and kicking, their bare shoulders in frills,
That set the cold stars shaking
Loose and wetly
Inside walking, darkly-coated people?

I tried to picture them out there, in the grass –

These rigid, gold archangels somehow
Drank up my attempt.

With a grisly awe
Like the idea of atoms, or like the idea
Of white-frosted galaxies floating apart,
As I sank deeper, each towered heavier,

Cathedral interior lit,
Empty or all-seeing angel stare
Leaning through me –
it was Resurrection,
The trumpet,
The corpse-weight of nightmare!
I wrenched free
I flitted
With my world, my garden, with my unlikely
Baby-cries leached from the thaw –
my shiverers
In the draughty wings of the year –

As I watch my own wife plant daffodils, turning the soil and placing the seemingly dried out, deliberately not in coffin shaped trenches I reflect on her hope and faith that the winter's dead and solid ground will be pierced in spring with these trumpets of resurrection that brought joy to the Wordsworths and painful comfort to Ted Hughes.

All this I note at both personal anniversaries and the collective one of All Souls. When those whom I treasured become part of a "never ending line," "continuous as the stars do shine." "Cathedral interior lit" "Leaning through me-it was Resurrection."

Grief is both personal and universal. Next weekend these will collide as we remember those who have died in war. At all souls it is more of a gentle merger. Our own loved ones placed alongside similar familiar loved ones of those beside us, together forming a panoply which as with the Daffodils speak both of sorrow and of life beyond.