Family Tribute

I thought I would begin with a thank you, to all of you who have come here this afternoon, and most especially family, friends and colleagues of Ben from the UK, to remember, to honour and to celebrate a wonderful young man.

Fran and I are deeply moved by your being here - and the messages of care, of shared sadness and concern at the loss of our Ben, have meant so much to us.

Thank you for being here!

But actually, I’ve realised that the biggest thank you I want to express today, is to Ben, for the love, the laughter, the tears, the friendship and the warmth he brought into our lives and into our family.

The first I knew of his arrival was Fran coming out into the garden one autumn, I recall I was sweeping leaves out of the garage, and she had an enormous smile on her face - and something to tell me!

The first the rest of the world knew was a few weeks later - when we traded in the hot hatch for an estate car- how clichéd were we!

Don’t worry, I won’t regale you with endless baby stories, but needless to say, my memories as a dad are of a baby who slept through every night and never seemed to need changing - Fran may remember things slightly differently.

But our blonde haired, rosy cheeked, blue-eyed baby, bounced through life, beginning as he was to go on - he smiled - and the whole world smiled with him. Every parent thinks their child is a genius, we were no exception, but were particularly impressed by signs of his early emotional intelligence and empathy, as to his own bemusement he cried through the happy ending of the little mermaid…. And at the age of two showing our friend Louise how to hug a tree!

Rouge Bouillon was his first primary school which he enjoyed, but thanks to the indomitable Miss Meadowcroft he made a timely transfer to De La Salle College where he felt very much at home, and that was to see him through to the end of sixth form, and the making of friendships that have lasted the years.

Memorable occasions, to chose but a few, were being sent home on the first day back after one summer holiday to get his long golden locks shorn - Fran was distraught! Music tech lessons on Fridays which made enduring every other subject bearable, and winning the school cup for Endeavour!

While he was still quite young, Ben was rummaging under the stairs and came across Fran’s alto sax, which to his delight he got a note out of - it became his early instrument of choice, and opened his heart to music in a new way, and in due course led to his being part of the De La Salle and Beaulieu Big Band, to solos and success at Eisteddfod – band trips to Paris, and some of the most enjoyable times of school, and also to his picking up other instruments, not least the bass.

Our coy young man surprised us when he committed to and thoroughly enjoyed a world challenge expedition to Thailand and Cambodia, with Mark Blanchard, and so began his love of travel.

Sixth form, which he loved, inevitably also coincided with his first foray into the world of driving – starting with our tired Fiat Punto which he managed to write off in rather elegant fashion, literally buckling the offside front wheel under the car as he pressed against a railway sleeper at the edge of the drive - while distractedly waving good bye to a pretty young Emily!

His second car, a Micra, while not quite a cut and shunt, was held together by the re-spray paint job rather than anything structural. I seem to remember the gearbox seized on that one and it went to the breakers very soon after he went to University.

Exeter was very much his choice, moments after he arrived and found his room in Randy P., he was off to explore campus and make new friends, and we his parents were history...

As you will know, Ben was for the most part remarkably laid back, and in addition to his MA in Mechanical Engineering, should surely have been awarded an honorary degree in ‘just enough’, with completed assignments in communication skills – A star in mumbling on the phone to his mum… job hunting - Renishaw were at the time on campus... and house hunting, his flat with Sam involved moving all of five yards next door…

University was full of fun memories for Ben and the building of more great friendships, and Tom will speak of some of that later. But the defining aspect of those four years were in the formation, life and antics of the band Isaac Indiana which became his Exeter family and which enjoyed some success in the southwest. They’re playing again here today, for the first time in about four years, and I’m so pleased, even though they’re a man down.

One of the things that in the darkness of recent weeks Fran, Rebecca and I have repeatedly given thanks for, has been Ben’s friends, we had heard the names and met one or two, but now we have been able to get to know this wonderfully wholesome group of young people a little better, and are so proud that Ben was of your number.

In early December, Ben had been diffident with you about how unwell he was and how things were sliding, but when I let it be known how things were really going, you arrived, and you arrived in number.

I shall never forget Lily, Sam and Tom getting a quick tutorial on changing oxygen bottles and then bringing Ben up to the hospital restaurant for a coffee, and the look on his face when he realised there were sixteen more of you waiting for him up there. More arrived in the following days, and those who were able, stayed on through that difficult week, camped out at the hospital by day and with Exeter friends by night - with him until the end, and I know you too will never forget the pizza party he instigated on the Thursday, the night before he died.

I casually mentioned someone a moment ago, **but Lily**, as all his family and friends quickly realised, in you he had found his everything, his reason to plough up and down the M5 to Bath - much to his sister’s and parents’ consternation, as those early mystery trips weren’t to see her at university.

Lily, you were his reason to take up running half marathons, to brave holding hamsters, to take up yoga – and much more. You were his reason for living and for his future, whenever you entered the room his eyes lit up. In the words of Katie Melua, he was able to ‘*call off the search’*.

Lily, Ben loved you and adored you, as do we - and I thank God for you being in his life.

I will leave the fun friendship stories to Tom, and the part he played as a design engineer at Renishaw to his boss, Colin, though in passing, I do want to say how privileged I was to be shown round Renishaw in Exeter, and to see some of the amazing projects Ben was part of developing, and to meet his colleagues, many of whom are here today. Thank you.

However, of all that we remember and celebrate of Ben, for me it comes down to his ***character***, and the man that had emerged these last several years.

A gentle but strong giant, and a gentleman to the very, very, end. As someone wrote of him in a letter recently, a very fine lad with a natural grace, kindness and humility.

Our Ben was full of fun, never happier than when, even through self-deprecating humour, he made others laugh.

Loyal and honourable in his relationships. Discerning and careful in his personal environs and in the big decisions, and immensely thoughtful and generous in his giving.

And behind the easy going smile and manner, both a *real* intellect – and also an understanding of the *value of being,* that took pleasure in the simple things, like lying on the floor to catch a ray of sunshine on his face through the window, of swimming in the sea and cooking up breakfast on the beach, or taking the time to listen and reflect on classical music, such as the Debussy we will hear later.

He was confident in seeking adventure and travel, and profoundly and quietly courageous in adversity.

Ben was and is someone, even as his father, I shall always look up to in *every* sense. And I’m proud to say, more a man in his twenty seven years than I shall ever be.

I want to say thank you to the people of Trinity and this Island, the love and prayers and kindness have wrapped us, and held us, and supported us, so so wonderfully.

I want to say an enormous thank you to the oncology team at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, who, from consultant to tea lady, took Ben to heart and extended to him and to us the warmest, kindest, most excellent, most compassionate care.

Three people amongst them Fran and I want to mention by name, Naomi, one of the ward sisters whose care was exceptional, Dr Ruth Stone, maybe just a few years older than Ben, whose passion and humanity in her work allowed us to trust her, and Louise, the palliative care nurse who, with great tenderness, gave us leadership and clarity.

Lastly .. again, Lily, and the friends ... your care for Ben and for us carried him and us as no other.

Through the darkest times Ben, Fran, Rebecca and I were crumbling and dismayed, and then you, amongst many others, rocked up, and you stayed, in what you did for Ben, and for us, you made love real, you made God manifest to us, in and through you, in the hardest of times, God’s love drew closer than ever, and holds us still. Thank you.