Address given at the Funeral Service of Malcolm Harper (as delivered)
by his twin brother, Ewan
St Mary’s Church, Charlbury, Thursday 23rd May 2013

1. We have gathered here this afternoon to give thanks for all that Malcolm has been for us: to mourn his passing and to support his dear wife Ann, his adored children Clare, Kate and Charles and his beloved grand-son Samson, as well as the wider family and many friends represented here. As you will all know, once you were a friend Malcolm never let you go. His heart was so embracing, so inclusive that in a sense we all became part of his extended family. He would want this service to be as joyful as possible.

2. Malcolm was a really wonderful person: remarkable in so many ways; his life was inspired by an immense generosity of spirit, which he expressed so diversely. Each one of us will bring happy, personal and often humorous memories of our contact with him. It was impossible to be with Malcolm without sensing a personality that was warm and passionate: someone who was always good company, full of stories and anecdotes, many of them retold (and how we loved the retelling), mimicking, teasing and with a great sense of timing. Here was a man of kindness but with sharp insights that were penetrating and sometimes uncomfortable.

3. I hope that I will be able to touch on some of your own memories so that together we may hold a strong image of a very dear and special man – a friend of so many people, both locally and right round the world.

4. Malcolm really did live on a wide global canvas. He may not have written the UNESCO preamble but he lived for and by it. He committed his life’s work to it:

   “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”

5. It was at 9:15am on 21st June 1939 that Malcolm was born in the Royal Northern Hospital, Holloway as part of a difficult caesarean operation. My Father had been told by the surgeon, Mr Malcolm McDonald, that he would be able to save our Mother’s life but it was unlikely that either twin would survive or perhaps just one. In the event we all did and Malcolm was named after the surgeon. I arrived 30 seconds later. Throughout his life, Malcolm savoured those 30 seconds, which had given him his treasured seniority.

6. Before I could pronounce Malcolm, I called him Conk and Conk he became for a lifetime, not just for me but within the family and for many friends. As children we did everything together, so it was not surprising that we had
telepathic moments. The most remarkable was at the precise moment I received an anaesthetic for a tonsils operation he fell off his bike, telling our Mother he just felt he was falling asleep. He knew nothing about what was happening to me. We were just 7.

7. In many ways the child was father of the man. His love for the Church and all things Christian showed itself early on. While I laid out my toy farm he played with his model church, laying it out for services, giving lengthy sermons to my flock of sheep!

8. The whole of our early childhood had been through times of war, with its sirens, bombs, watching London burn at night. We were aware of people who didn’t come home and this may well have coloured Conk’s decision to pursue peace as a lifelong ambition.

9. As twins we were happily sandwiched between our older brother Michael and beloved younger sister Diana who often had to play the role of a fourth boy in our games. We were brought up to understand that with a comfortable home style came duties and responsibilities. On reflection I can see that Malcolm inherited the sensitivity of our mother combined with the forthright intellect of our father. This formed the bedrock of his character throughout his life.

10. It was a huge shock to us all when our older brother, Michael, was killed flying in the RAF in 1957. This was a sadness which drew us all together and strengthened our family faith. It was an event which changed the shape of our lives, jolting the three of us sharply into adulthood. Michael died during the Cold War, which still held fears of fighting, and I have no doubt that coming to terms with his accident also strengthened Malcolm’s determination to work for a better world.

11. Cricket was an obsession in our household and remained a lifelong love for Malcolm, as Charles will be telling us.

12. He greatly enjoyed his time at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Learning to row was a highlight. He discovered the strengths of becoming part of a tightly knit team. He loved the rowing club’s blazer which he wore at parties throughout his life, white with black piping around the edges. One of the last photographs shows him wearing it.

13. At Cambridge his interest in International Peace began to flower; he was the college rep for the University United Nations Association. One long Vac he spent digging drains in an Austrian refugee camp. Already he was beginning to offer his life to other people.
14. The Dean at Trinity Hall was none other than Robert Runcie, Bob to all of us. With Martin Chadwick, who became your vicar here, as the chaplain, he led a lively chapel and the experience there confirmed Conk’s view that he should become ordained. He followed Bob and Lindy to Cuddesden where he lodged in their house and became a close, lifelong friend, with Rebecca becoming his Goddaughter. When Malcolm passed the necessary exams, Bob felt that he should have a year’s different experience before making his final commitment. He arranged for him to be PA to Archbishop Joost de Blank in Cape Town. This experience led to two important conclusions: first that he would not be ordained and secondly that his heart had found something very special in Africa. It was in South Africa, shattered by Apartheid, that he found the seeds of his true vocation in wishing to help underprivileged people.

15. Romance entered Malcolm’s life on the fourth floor at Oxfam. Once he had met Ann he knew exactly whom he wished to marry. They fell in love and remained so for the 47 years of their marriage.

16. Malcolm and Ann were bound together by what she said only last week was an idealism - wanting to change the world. She wondered now whether it had been naïve, but it hadn’t been. It was exactly the sort of belief and commitment that the world needed then, and still needs to hear today. So many people talk about it, but they were among the few who actually committed their lives to it, pursuing that vision so faithfully day by day. David Cameron saw this, and wrote in a personal letter to Ann on Monday “Malcolm was a very special man whose whole life was spent helping those in the world who were less fortunate than himself. He was one of those people who made a difference and a good difference at that.” He underlined good.

17. Together Ann and Malcolm made The Cottages a happy, vibrant home for their three much loved and cherished children. Speaking to them they happily recalled waiting for the explosion of temper on the first day of every holiday and for the cry “that’s it, we are turning back and going home”. His cooking was infamous with tepid pea soup being the greatest fear of Ann not being at home! There are many happy stories to share.

18. Their home was always open to people from far and wide with a warm welcome guaranteed. They bridged both international and local communities, despite his being away so much. Through cricket, the Church, the Chairmanship of Burford School and helping towards raising the magnificent sum of £32,000 in Charlbury for clearing minefields in Angola, Malcolm could always be relied upon to help. He has been described as a pillar of the community.
19. At Oxfam Malcolm had started as PA to Lesley Kirtley, the Director, at a perfect moment of its development. Oxfam was changing from being an organisation which responded to immediate disasters to one where its role included fighting the root causes of famine and disease.

20. Lesley realised that this would require a generation of younger people. Malcolm was amongst that group and responded enthusiastically to the opportunities for promoting change. His first major post was to be appointed East African Field Director in Nairobi. He and Ann settled there and it was there that Clare was born.

21. In Nairobi he learnt to respond to all sorts of unexpected requests. When Mike Woolridge, in the VSO, needed printing equipment, Malcolm somehow conjured up 12 Gestetner machines from nowhere. His job was to ensure that aid reached the right destination.

22. His travels took him to Uganda, where he was to return throughout his life, being there again only last year. He co-founded the Charity, Friends of Northern Uganda, FONU, in an attempt to create peace where Governments had failed to make progress. It was his ability to make relationships, in this case across religious divides, based on his openness and trustworthiness, which was to make him so effective throughout his international career. He clearly came across as a man who wanted peace with no personal agendas.

23. He quickly had to learn about local customs. It was while travelling in Northern Kenya amongst the Turkan nomads, that he was a guest of honour at a tribal dinner. They had prepared a fatted goat and offered Malcolm the first choice of the meat pointing him towards the entrails. He just felt he couldn’t do it, and his quick wit led him to say that in the interests of Harem Bay (Jomo Kenyatta’s phrase for good will) he should share the delicacy, passing it quickly to the next guest. By the time the dish was returned it was empty so the crisis had passed and further friendships had been cemented.

24. He soon learned to seek out the Catholic fathers for supper. Malcolm was especially welcome because it was only when entertaining a guest that they were allowed to drink a whisky, or two or three!

25. Back in Oxford he was in time appointed Communications Director. This led to high level political contacts, growing use of the media in news and education and endless overseas trips to visit the scenes of earthquakes, floods and other disasters. He was one of the last people to leave Saigon, helping to shepherd refugee children out of South Vietnam in the emergency airlift. We were all so relieved that he himself got out in time.
26. Even tougher was his remarkable role in spearheading Western relief aid into Cambodia after the fall of the Pol Pot regime in 1979. He was one of a small group to co-ordinate the world wide response to the devastating effects of genocide with its unbelievable scale of human suffering. Oxfam, then relatively small, was the first Western agency there; much larger ones like UNICEF and World Vision were to follow. It was important that Cambodia with its damaged infrastructure was not swamped with aid. Part of Malcolm’s genius for leadership was, without causing offence, to launch and chair weekly inter-agency meetings to ensure that aid was being coordinated effectively without any jostling for position. It worked.

27. It was a hectic period flying to and from the international base in Singapore in an old wartime DC 3 piloted by an alcoholic whom they all christened Biggles. Nick Morris, the first Western medical Doctor to reach Cambodia, had been loaded at Oxford with books on nutrition and – wait for it - a copy of the latest Wisden. He emphasised that Malcolm’s wonderful sense of humour, even in the most awful situations, broke down barriers and enhanced the effectiveness of the whole operation.

28. Malcolm and his team identified with the enormous suffering of individuals and the unique challenge of coming to terms with communal grief on a massive scale. In the Killing Fields 2 million people had been exterminated out of a population of just 6 million. Emotionally it tested all of them to the extreme. It was something they rarely spoke about.

29. The raising of £24 million in 3 - 4 months for Cambodia, some through Blue Peter, was to become pivotal in Oxfam’s subsequent development.

30. After 18 years with Oxfam the move in 1982 to the UK United Nations Association as its Director, seemed a natural one. Here his formidable international experience linked with his huge talent for public speaking grew still further. He balanced the world stage with visiting the network of UNA Associations around the Country. During his 22 years there the offices in Whitehall Court gained a new energy and consequence. He showed great courage in standing up for what he thought was right, as he pursued the social justice which he saw as the essential precursor of lasting peace.

31. Those who have kindly spoken to me about his work at UNA, emphasised the extraordinary grasp he had of major strategic issues. He was never happier than when engaging with what appeared to be intractable problems.

32. In the Congo, where war had been endemic, with perhaps as many as 6 million civilians dying, there were enormous ethnic divisions and fearful mistrust. The UN held its talks with high level politicians, but Malcolm, energetically supported by Cissa Wa Numbe, realised that for peace to work
community leaders had to become directly involved. Engaging with them was an enormous task. After four visits he was to Chair the first community meeting in 2005 with 11 provinces represented. He helped lay out a road map on how to go forward by working through communities. It has become a new national forum and is working. In response the UN has changed its style and now invites community leaders to its meetings with senior politicians.

33. His remarkable work was acknowledged with his appointment as a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in the year 2000, an honour that was widely welcomed.

34. Malcolm’s death has caused a ripple right round the world. The judgment of many in Africa is that his contribution to peace and reconciliation changed the lives of people there on an enormous scale. Africa has lost a great friend but many believe strongly that death will not be the end of Malcolm’s influence.

35. Martin Daunton, Master of Trinity Hall, has written saying that he hopes that all Malcolm has worked for, in trying to make the world a better place, will live on in the spirit of the College.

36. So what should we take away from this service? If the life of a profoundly good man means anything, it is to encourage us to leave here determined to follow his example, pursuing social justice, working for peace and seeking truth, and doing it with humour and grace.

37. May I finish with a prayer

Thank you, Lord, for Malcolm, for all you have given us through his life. Malcolm, may the great love of Jesus Christ forgive all that needs to be forgiven, enfolding you in his arms, and giving you everlasting joy and peace. Amen