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WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN, NUNEATON 17 JUNE 2007

*The Guest of Honour was the Revd Don Jones, Vicar of St Nicolas ('Milby')
Church, Nuneaton. He gave the following Address:*

As I reflected on 'famous sons and daughters of Nuneaton', I came up with a short list. George Eliot/Mary Anne Evans, Larry Grayson, Ken Loach.

George Eliot must have cut quite an unconventional figure in her day. Larry Grayson, that rather gentle comedian, was also quite an unconventional character. Then Ken Loach, perhaps not so controversial in his personal life, none the less often espousing unconventional causes through his films. Is it something about Nuneaton that those it throws up into the arms of fame should have something of the unconventional about them? – or at least an eye for the unconventional, a sympathy for the unconventional?

I must thank you for the privilege of being invited here today as vicar of St Nicolas, Nuneaton, vicar of the 'Milby Church' in George Eliot's novels. And I must thank John Burton for furnishing me with my copy of *Scenes of Clerical Life* – 150th anniversary edition.

It has been interesting and instructive to read about life in Nuneaton 150 years ago: of the events and people associated with our church and town in such a different age. What struck me was the sympathy and insight of Mary Anne Evans. Perhaps her own struggles with society and its expectations explain something of her acute awareness that things aren't always what they seem at first glance.

When you first glimpse the rather sad and burnt-out figure of old Mr Gilfil – how easy it is to dismiss him and not give a second glance. Yet for George Eliot there is a story here. He was once a vigorous young man in love – and so the story unfolds. She sees behind the public face – the shop front of people's lives – to the complex human stories that make us all at the same time both ordinary and extraordinary: perhaps both conventional and unconventional. That's what I've discovered about Nuneaton over the last eleven years as vicar of Nuneaton.

When I first came here people said it was a very ordinary town. 'It's a good place to get away from.' As if its proximity to the motorway network was its major asset! When, a few years after I arrived, the famous water feature was erected at the roundabout by Halfords, it was even hailed as the major tourist attraction for the town! 'See the dandelion and you've seen the sights of Nuneaton!'

When comparing Nuneaton in the north of Warwickshire with the rather more salubrious south Warwickshire, I heard the phrase: 'down there it's all hunting and shooting. Up 'ere it's all shuntin' and hooting!' – reflecting the vibrant days of its railway and coal industry.

Nuneaton is an unassuming place – maybe a place with not a lot of self-confidence. At first glance. But part of the extraordinary privilege of my job as 'vicar of Milby', as it were, is that I get invited into people's lives at times when the 'shop front' has been dropped, or even shattered, and the public face set aside.

Over the last decade I've had the privilege of drawing alongside people and discovering, perhaps like a good novelist, that there is no such thing as an ordinary person. Whatever people's station in life; whether they've had the best education, or can barely read and write. whether they live in a grand house or they're homeless, people are capable of the most extraordinary things. Here in Nuneaton, I've witnessed courage – in fact that's something I see a lot of – but it'll never get in the papers. I think George Eliot glimpsed it in Janet Dempster, and in Mr Tryan for example. And I've witnessed integrity and compassion – sometimes in the most surprising people (e.g. Mr Jerome in 'Janet's Repentance').

Of course I've also come across small-mindedness and mean-spiritedness. There's plenty of that in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. But overall, I find a remarkable amount of heroism and inspiration in apparently very ordinary local people, and it is very humbling.

I'm no literary scholar, and certainly no expert on George Eliot, but I've been given to understand that Mary Anne Evans turned against her early evangelical faith in later years. Be that as it may, I found her portrait of Mr Tryan quite sympathetic in 'Janet's Repentance'. Despite perhaps a certain drivenness about him, Mr Tryan did at least seem to have a sound grasp of the grace of God, which I believe is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. It's about God meeting people, in all the glorious mess and mix of ordinary life, and as they begin to face up to the realities of their ordinary lives, so the God of all grace can meet them there in that reality. And sometimes the agents of those grace-encounters can be other, often flawed and ordinary people – sometimes the outcomes can be quite extraordinary.

So thank you to George Eliot. I pay my tribute today, for having the respect for ordinary people to pay close attention to them – and for so elegantly relating the inside story of some of the people of this town.

May we, 150 years on, in this more frenetic age – in the whirlwind of a world driven by fear and greed – where people's lives are squeezed and pressured and rushed – may we take a leaf out of George Eliot's books, and take the time to pay attention to the ordinary people God brings us into everyday contact with. And maybe, by God's grace, we might discover something of the extraordinary in the ordinary. And discover the often fascinating and unconventional stories in apparently conventional ordinary people.