

Ministry that began in the Boys' Brigade

The Rev Alan Ball is marking 50 years since his ordination and his 99th birthday. He looks back with thanks and forward in hope

THE Rev Alan Ball may well be the oldest priest in the diocese – but his first attempt at preaching didn't go down too well.

At the age of 18, he spoke at a Boys' Brigade meeting in Birmingham. One of the young boys approached him afterwards and said: "Please, sir, that was a load of rubbish."

Fortunately, that didn't deter him. He was ultimately ordained in 1975, and so is celebrating the 50th anniversary of that event this year. And the Gosport priest also clocked up his 99th birthday in April.

"I'm grateful for God's grace in my long life," he said. "My Christian faith has been an essential ingredient, not only to my ministry but also in my working life in industry and everyday dealings with people. At work, my employees may not have all shared my beliefs, but they all respected them."

Alan was born in 1926, one of twin boys. He was brought up in a pleasant new council estate in Perry Common, Birmingham. As a youth he joined the local unit of the Boys' Brigade, based at St Martin's Church in Perry Common.

This organisation had been founded in Glasgow in 1883 for the benefit of young boys from poorer backgrounds. It gave them the

opportunity to become involved in many activities, especially team sport, but critically it was a Christian organisation and attendance at Bible Study at church on Sundays was compulsory. Members of staff had to take it in turn to give an 'address' at these meetings, which is how his first sermon came as an 18-year-old junior leader.

'My Christian faith has been essential to my ministry and working life'

Alan had left school at 14 to take up an apprenticeship in the skill of toolmaking. When war was declared in 1939, the company he worked for was contracted to make tools for the manufacture of parts for tanks and armaments. Being in a reserved occupation prevented him from joining the Royal Navy, which he had wanted to do at 18.

He met Joan, who was the organist at St Martin's, during his association with the Boys' Brigade there. They married in 1949 and were together for 67 years, until Joan's death in 2016.

Alan set up his own small manufacturing company a few years after the war, mainly making



components for the motor industry. Joan was incredibly supportive during some very tough times, at the same time bringing up their two children Christine and Edward.

The couple were living in a different part of Birmingham, attending St Paul's Church, Hamstead. Alan left the Boys' Brigade and began training as a lay reader. He then felt called to start training for ordination at Queen's College Birmingham, which offered a rigorous three-year part-time course. He was made a deacon in the summer of 1975 and was ordained priest at Michaelmas the same year.

To add to his life in business and as a non-stipendiary priest, he also



accepted an invitation to become the chaplain of the local Sea Cadet unit. He relished the role, which was mainly pastoral.

After Alan's retirement from business in the early 1990s, the couple moved to Alverstoke to be nearer family members. Alan was licensed as a non-stipendiary priest attached to St Mary's Church, Alverstoke, under Canon Ted Goodyer.

As it is a large parish, there were many funerals. So he was able to help many bereaved families, in addition to leading worship, pastoral visits and other ministry. He is still sometimes asked to give an address at funerals.

For 20 years, Alan worked at St Faith's in Leesland, a mission church within the parish. He led worship, organised pastoral visits and did many baptisms. He finished there when the nature of the church changed. His final service was attended by many children and young people who had been baptised by Alan and was a sad but joyous occasion, as the couple were much loved there.

Alan then helped at Christ Church, Gosport and took the 8am Communion once a month until the Gosport re-organisation. He now worships online, joining the service from Winchester Cathedral.

During all this time he was also chaplain to the local Sea Cadets, continuing his interest in working



Far left: Alan with his great-grandchild Henrietta; above left: part of the Boys' Brigade in 1949 (front, second left); left: a portrait from the 1970s; above: the final service at St Faith's, Gosport, with Joan and those who he had baptised

with youth organisations. Alan was also chaplain to the local Royal Naval Association

and to the Gosport War Memorial Hospital, where he held Sunday Communion in the little chapel, with Joan often playing the piano. He would offer Communion on the wards to those who were too weak to attend.

Joan spent several weeks in hospital before her death and Alan spent his days with her, sharing love, memories and their faith. Knowing that her end was near, she constantly clutched a small wooden cross that she'd been given.

"It was quality time, good and precious," he said. "It really helped me to cope with the grief of the situation. I took her funeral at our beloved St Faith's – after all, I knew her better than anyone else."

In 2003, there was a family tragedy when his son Edward lost his wife Celia, to cancer of the appendix. She was just 43. But the family's faith helped them to cope with this.

Edward's current wife, Mary, is training for ordination with our diocese. Alan plans to give her his stoles. They live nearby and Edward

is able to visit most days. His daughter Christine and her husband visit from Nottingham and they go on holiday together. He has seven grandchildren, several of whom he had the pleasure of baptising, and in the last year three great-grandchildren have been born, taking the total to 13. "Christmas is getting expensive," he said.

Alan lives alone and is always smart. With help, he keeps his house and garden immaculate. His mobility is poor and he is partially blind and deaf, but is grateful to the medics for their help with ears, eyes and heart. He is currently undergoing immunotherapy, a relatively new treatment, for facial cancer.

"St Francis, towards the end of his life, called his body 'Brother Ass' – useful but a nuisance," said Alan. "I'm inclined to agree. Of course, my Christian faith has been a constant throughout my life. My pastoral duties were as important at work as anywhere else, and obviously influenced by my faith. It was also a great privilege to be asked to do a family wedding for an employee, and also a couple of family funerals."

"I do get lonely, but I'm not depressed. I'm happy to offer a cuppa and biscuit for any visitor. I look back with grateful thanks and look forward with hope."