**EVENSONG, Portsmouth Cathedral, 29 April 2018**

**Presentation of St Thomas Awards**

It’s always a little difficult to tell at what point in the Old Testament we move from the proclamation of hope for Israel, to hope for the whole world. In these latter stages of the book of the prophet Isaiah we read of a hope that extends beyond all boundaries, that draws in all people. But they are still being drawn to Mount Zion, for they are coming to the light of God which illuminates the world through the City of the Lord. So even here, the hope of God is hope for a particular people and place first, and then through them it becomes hope for all creation.

It can at times be easier to love an abstract, universal humanity, to love an idea, than it is to love those who are around us day in, day out, with all their frustrating unwillingness to be who we want them to be. If universal hope requires us to look out beyond our own horizons, then the particular hope described in the Old Testament requires us to abide steadily in love with those who make up our local community, our families, our local Churches. If to love our distant neighbours is to love without regard to what we can get back in return, then to love our near neighbours is to love without regard to whether what we think we are owed is returned or not. It is to love in a way that must learn to transcend rebuff, disappointment, failure, and apparent fruitlessness, and then to keep on loving. Bonhoeffer is quoted as saying that those who love their idea of community will destroy community, but those who love the people around them will create it. That love is difficult, and asks much of us.

It is that love in action that we celebrate in the lives of those receiving awards this evening, and of course many others too. It is not that their work has only focused on their local areas, but that in a variety of different ways, long standing service has demonstrated that love which keeps on going with the messy and challenging concrete realities of day to day life.

A week ago yesterday I picked up a voicemail message left by **David Tamcken** who spoke with typical humility. I am gobsmacked, he said, to receive this award; about 10 family will be at the service and I expect, he went on with that characteristic innocence about the affection for him, a very few from church. The next day David died suddenly and we miss a Reader, confidant, churchwarden and friend, an energetic supporter of our links with Ghana, especially schools, and in the vanguard of developments in parish ministry. Shirley is bravely and courageously here tonight with family and parishioners as we honour David.

**Kay Lancaster** died peacefully yesterday morning after a very long illness courageously and patiently borne. Her quiet efficiency and care blessed both the parish of Alverstoke, and her beloved St Francis’ daughter church, and the diocese she served so well for so long until her health deteriorated a few years ago. I sat with Kay in church on the morning of Christmas Eve and early on Easter morning visited her in the hospice with the badge of this Award, as we both knew that she would not be able to attend tonight. We honour her and her lovely Christian ministry.

**Roger Sutton** has served the community and the church. As a much loved GP until recently retiring, Roger has brought his Christian faith into his work among the people of Havant’s outer estates. His patience, generosity and thoughtfulness are legendary and beyond that ministry in the community he has served the parish of St Jude’s here in the city just as willingly, finally as Churchwarden for six years. Those of us who know him, respect and admire him too for his bravery and determination in both proactive and reactive responses to whatever life has thrown at him.

**Peter Short**, another in that unsung hero ministry as churchwarden, has held that office in Warnford for over 40 years. But his nomination for this Award isn’t for length of service but for its quality. He has been exemplary – humble, faithful, cheerful – and his parish roles, and community ones too, are many as parish treasurer, village garden club and sports club chairman, sacristan, server, deanery synod and finance rep and so on – but I mustn’t omit that at 85 he mows the churchyard.

**Mike Pye** is the only ordained recipient this year. He retires soon after 11 years of Vicar of Landport. There’s actually no such title but the point is that Mike has served the most deprived community in the diocese, by most measures, with commitment and dedication and reminded us all that the clergy are not simply chaplains to a church and its community. From All Saints he has also contributed hugely to the mission of the central cluster of churches and been a thoughtful as well as doughty contributor to deanery and diocesan financial discussions.

Similarly **Jim Palmer**, lately Churchwarden at St Columba Fareham, has combined fabric care, the parish’s IT needs, and preparation for GDPR with a heart for the community. This is highlighted by the Highlands Hub café in the local shopping parade, a meeting place, internet café and much more for in service and witness, where Jim is a key volunteer and chairs the committee, finding time for further expression of Christian commitment through local politics.

**David Lougher** is the go to person for queries in Blendworth about maintenance, supply and upkeep to keep things running, and is hands on cleaning floors and doing maintenance jobs He too has served as treasurer, churchwarden, hall bookings secretary and also ran an arts and music festival. He lives out his Christian service in genuine and unassuming practical ways, based on the insights from being in a bible study group, a communion assistant and server.

**Susan Jones** begins each day with the morning office and from that moves into unobtrusive cleaning, decorating, organising, coordinating and leadership in the parish of Shedfield. Robust common sense and good humour are characteristic of the support as Verger and Sacristan she gives the ministers she supports so loyally, including accommodating the quirks and foibles of the bishop. She’s a Ride and Stride enthusiast, absolutely committed to baptism ministry and follow up, and after teaching at the local school for 20 years seems to know most brides and grooms.

**Graham Johnson** has lived and worshipped in Hawkley for many years, serving on the Church Council and as Churchwarden, returning this month to do another stint. He is, of course, coming into post as the benefice welcomes a new parish priest, Archdeacon Peter, and Graham highlights the important role longstanding servants of the gospel, the church and community bring to the active support of our clergy, briefing them, advising them and sometimes warning them. So we thank Graham for his consistent generous service.

**Brian Hay’s** service to education and schools has been outstanding. Formerly a member of our diocesan education team, and like Kay Lancaster his award is a reminder of the important work of our small diocesan staff team out and about so much in the diocese, and also a school Governor. This, as you know, is a demanding but absolutely crucial voluntary role in this critical time for schools. Brian’s particular contribution has been to be committed, available and loyal as a governor of our secondary comprehensive school Charter Academy here in the city, but I know he’d encourage you to consider supporting your schools, church and community, in this way.

**Brenda Ellison’s** devoted ministry at St John’s Sandown has led the parish, particularly through a lengthy vacancy soon to end, with amazing stamina and self-sacrifice. She is central to so much at St John’s – services such as Food for Thought, hall bookings, PCC coordination, fund raising, baking and cooking. Former curates of the parish speak lovingly of her advice and practical support. Brenda’s badge says Churchwarden but she is that and much more; she means so much to that parish.

**Joan Cozens** is another practical personification of practical Christianity. She’s modest and unassuming and her welcoming smile and words are offered to all-comers as Parish Warden in the North End Team, though those of us who know her well are aware of the challenges she’s personally faced over the years. Beyond her many church roles she has long and actively worked as a volunteer with many community groups and charities including am Am Dram, driving, toy library, Replay, Buckland Park Play Association among many.

**Molly and John Cheverton** have offered their commitment to Jesus Christ in Seaview for both community and church for over half a century. They ran the community call system for over 20 years using two CB radios to give a friendly call every morning to elderly and vulnerable people. Molly started the Friendship lunches linking lonely and bereaved people, she ran a youth club, a table tennis club, and is a Mothers Union mainstay. They are the face of the church in Seaview. John was baptised at St Peter’s where he has been organist for 54 years, still in post, still playing for Nettlestone School weekly collective worship, and PCC secretary for an astonishing 63 years.

**Rupert Bennett** has been a pivotal member of St Andrew’s Hayling from its founding. He continues to be cherished and revered for his decades of quiet humble service, integral in the running of the church, ensuring the liturgies ran smoothly and being a uniting presence in the congregation. He has recently had to step back because of ill health, having cared for Monica his wife with devotion and patience. With all tonight’s recipients he is genuinely an unsung hero and it is truly a privilege to draw them out of their humility and honour them, along with the countless more who serve the Gospel so faithfully in our communities, parishes and chaplaincies.

Their work speaks of the abiding love that is both particular, focused on real people and real lives, and universal, because such love will always draw people in. That in the end is the picture of Isaiah 60, that genuinely Godly love, lived out in real places and among real people, shines like a bright light in a dark world, drawing people in from all over, building a new humanity through day to day lives of compassion.