

# LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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## In Memoriam: JRH

Perhaps it was his eyes. A “piercing Irish blue,” his daughter called them, and they pierced to the very soul. I have never known eyes that expressed so much—warmth and wit, humility and honor, dignity and devotion, sanctity and sincerity, majesty and mirth, loyalty and love. To peer into the depths upon depths of those luminous eyes was to encounter the irresistible vitality of truth. As with Nephi, the son of Nephi, “it [was] not possible that [one] could disbelieve his words, . . . so great was his faith on the Lord Jesus Christ” (3 Ne. 7:18). Truly, “the light of the body is the eye” (Matt. 6:22). What a light! And what an eye! It was an eye single to the glory of God.

Perhaps it was his voice. That voice rang with kindness and roared with conviction. By turns folksy and fervent, it ranged from lively good cheer to subdued reverence to deep organ thunder. Never was a voice so absolutely attuned to its message; never has a voice furnished so transparent a window to a soul. This was true even, and perhaps especially, when in his final months and years, his voice was racked by illness. It was truest of all in his final moments at the general conference podium, when with a diminished voice but with faith undimmed, he whispered/sang “Amazing Grace.”

Perhaps it was his words. Buffon famously opined that “style is the man himself.” Rarely has a man revealed himself so completely through the words he meticulously chose and magnificently deployed. The sweeping power of his prose gave full expression to the overflowing abundance of his heart. His writing was as inimitable as it was indelible. And as an orator he had no peer. In him the restored gospel finally found its Pericles and its Cicero, its Lincoln and Churchill and King.

Perhaps it was his heart. That heart was generous and noble, compassionate and full. Without any trace of Whitman’s bombast, it was huge and embraced multitudes. It even embraced me. He never saw me without his unfailingly affectionate salute: “Justin, how are you? I love you!” It was a heart that pulsed with faith, hope, and charity—a heart that exuded Christlike love. It was a heart that imparted joy and resolution, courage and hope. It was a heart too large for a human frame; a heart too pure for a fallen world.

In this regard, there are a hundred talks that one might quote. I’ll cite just one of my favorites—one whose title tells it all: “An High Priest of Good Things to Come.” Speaking of the Savior in October 1999, then Elder Holland said this:

“Because Christ’s eyes were unfailingly fixed on the future, He could endure all that was required of Him, suffer as no man can suffer except it be ‘unto death,’ . . . look upon the wreckage of individual lives and the promises of ancient Israel lying in ruins around Him, and still say then and now, ‘Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.’ How could He do this? How could He believe it? *Because He knows that for the faithful, things will be made right soon enough. He is a King; He speaks for the crown; He knows what can be promised.*”<sup>1</sup>

I suppose it was all these things and many more. And yet it was more than all these combined, or any others we might name. The whole of Jeffrey R. Holland was always greater than the sum of his parts. What I really loved was his soul.

Virtually no one has influenced me more. Since my last year of high school, I have studied and savored all that came from his tongue or his

pen. Lia and I retraced the Hollands' path from St. George to New Haven, then back to BYU. I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. I still do.

I consider it a consummate gift of heavenly grace—a gift as unanticipated as it was unearned—that in President Holland's final years I was blessed in a modest measure to know him personally. The great desire of my heart is to help BYU become the university he knew we could become. No one ever loved this university more or served it better. I wanted him to know that we are committed to keeping the BYU banner flying high and its fire burning bright. I wanted him to know that we are resolved to keep the Good Ship BYU

shipshape and seaworthy, sailing strong and true toward our millennial port of destiny and promise.

After I gave my first university conference message as academic vice president, President Holland sent me a characteristically generous note. Reviewing that tender note following his death, I believe it serves as his valedictory blessing on us all.

"I am so immensely proud of you," he wrote, "and will be cheering you on from both sides of the veil."<sup>2</sup>

*Good night, sweet Prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!*

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, "An High Priest of Good Things to Come," *Ensign*, November 1999 (italics in original).

<sup>2</sup> Personal correspondence, 15 September 2023.