

He met the queen, learned magic and at 100, this retired priest returned to the pulpit



Lane Sainty Arizona Republic

It was warm out as people arrived for the 10 a.m. service, the last vestiges of summer still hanging on. The organist watched as congregants filed into wooden pews, the low hum of conversation filling the air as they waited for the service to begin.

Out of sight, in the crowded vestry, the Rev. Canon Geoffrey Dibbs stood before a walker. He was surrounded by his fellow clergy, all of them in billowing white robes. One placed a green stole around his neck. The organist began to play, and the clergy procession moved down the aisle. There were hymns and prayers and readings, and then it was Dibbs' turn.

As he approached the pulpit, he felt nervous. But he didn't look it. As he began to speak, no trace of a waver, he sounded like a man who had been doing this a long, long time.

The next day, he would celebrate his 100th birthday. Letters of congratulations had arrived from King Charles and Queen Camilla, the governor general of Canada, and the Bishop of Huron. They were on display in a nearby function room, along with food and drinks and Union Jack song sheets for "God Save The King", a nod to Dibbs' homeland.

First, though, it was time for one more sermon. His return to the pulpit was set in motion when he was a sprightly 98. Someone at his church had asked him what he was looking forward to, and he had an answer ready: preaching a sermon on his 100th birthday. "Never expected to reach that," Dibbs said, with a laugh.

But he had. And on this Sunday, aged 99 and 364 days, he had arrived at Advent Episcopal Church in Sun City West, ready to preach the gospel of the day.

"In 1992, I retired and came down to Sun City West," he told the congregation. "As some of you know, before going to our first service at Advent, my dear Margaret suggested I should not wear my clerical collar, and I should not tell anyone what I did."



A low rumble of laughter ran through the pews, the crowd anticipating the punchline. Many of them knew his incognito period had lasted all of two weeks. That's how long it took for someone to discover he was a retired priest, and invite him to join the staff at Advent. He did remain for the next 26 years. "So much for retirement," Dibbs cracked.

A plan for priesthood, interrupted by war

Dibbs was born in Knaresborough, a town in Yorkshire, England, on Oct. 14, 1924.

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He was blessed with “two very good parents,” he said, and split his time between school and sport: the classic British trio of soccer, cricket and rugby. He attended a boy’s club, where one of his leaders was a magician, and earned his driver’s license at 14, as was standard back then.

He went to church twice on Sundays, his father in the choir, and as he progressed through school and won scholarships for university, he planned to become ordained as a priest. “But of course, the war stopped that,” Dibbs said. He was called up at 17, World War II in full swing. Dibbs joined the Royal Air Force and trained as a wireless technician, his unit roaming all over England to set up radio signals.

It was during this time he met Margaret, in a little village in Oxfordshire.

“The squire of the village invited our unit to a dance,” he recalled, “and that’s where I met her. It must have been love at first sight.”

Dibbs was deployed overseas as part of Tiger Force, a unit set to invade Japan. On the way over, the ship’s chaplain discovered his aspirations for the clergy, and took him on as an assistant. He was in Okinawa when, in August 1945, the U.S. dropped atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands and triggering Japan’s surrender. The invasion called off, Dibbs went to Hong Kong instead and continued as an assistant chaplain, sometimes giving as many as eight services to different units on a single Sunday.

He found his way back to England in 1947, and resumed his journey to priesthood. It had always felt like a calling, he said. “I think it’s just an interest in people,” he said, reflecting on the qualities of a priest. “Being there to help, if I could help at all.”

In 1948, he and Margaret married, and in 1953, he was ordained. He was assigned as a curate, a kind of priest’s assistant, to the parish of Droylsden.



“I had a wonderful priest there, but life was very hectic,” Dibbs said, diplomatically. “For instance, I was ordained in Manchester Cathedral on the Sunday morning and he came to me after that and he said, ‘Well, I don’t expect you to be in Sunday School this afternoon, but I expect you to be in church tonight, and we’ll meet tomorrow at 8 o’clock.’”

Every Monday morning, the priest would hand him a stack of visiting cards and say: “I want you to visit all these people this week, no excuses.” Dibbs’ daily timetable consisted of study, visitations, church meetings and services, leaving little time for leisure. He yearned to attend games for the local soccer team, but his schedule simply didn’t allow it. One evening though, he was heading home from a church meeting, saw the game was still on, and slipped in the gate.

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"I'd only been in five minutes before the goalkeeper broke his leg," Dibbs said. "They saw me with the collar and said, 'Would you mind taking him to hospital?'"

It was a stroke of bad luck — more so for the goalkeeper — but the real trouble came the next day, when the morning newspaper ran the headline: Curate Takes Goalkeeper To Hospital.

It did not escape the priest's attention. "He wasn't amused," Dibbs said.

Run-ins with the royals

In 1958, Dibbs was appointed rector to Queen Elizabeth II, managing one of several parishes across England that were designated places for the queen to attend church when traveling. She never came to the church, but she regularly visited the parish because it was home to Britain's leading racehorse breeder, and horses were a passion of the queen's.

But because the racehorse breeder was a bachelor, Dibbs said, the queen had to travel 10 miles down the road at night to avoid any whisper of impropriety. "She had all her retinue with her," he said, "but she couldn't stay."

Dibbs met the queen several times. What were their conversations like?

"Oh, just normal." He and Margaret were also invited down to Buckingham Palace, where they got a behind-the-scenes view of royal life.

He vividly remembers the thick tread of the carpet. "You just sort of sank in," he said.

Decades later, watching the Netflix hit "The Crown" with his daughter, Amanda, Dibbs would comment on the realistic set: "I've been through those doors. I've been up that staircase."

What is his take on the show? "In the main, it was true to life."

In 1966, he and Margaret and their two kids followed Dibbs' family to Canada.

There, he became rector of St. Alban's in London, Ontario. It was struggling when he took it over, Dibbs said, a congregation of two dozen. The Bishop of Huron told him: "Do anything you want to bring the church alive."

The key was music. A banjo player suggested they do a folk service. Five musicians gathered one Sunday evening, for a service aimed at young people, and it was an unexpected hit. It transformed into a gospel group, and then into a traveling choir, which made appearances around Ontario and even journeyed into the U.S. The congregation pitched in for a new electronic organ to replace the "hopeless" pedal harmonium they had so rapidly outgrown.

Attendance swelled to 100, and 300 on Sundays.

"It was really nothing to do with me," Dibbs said. "I can't explain it really."



It was a busy time for Dibbs. On top of his rector duties, he was editing the Huron Church News. He was also moonlighting as a professional magician under the stage name Marvelle.

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It had started at his boy's club. All those years ago, the magician leader had told the group that if anyone wanted to learn some magic, to see him afterward. "And I did," Dibbs said. "And I just went on from there and eventually turned professional."

His specialty was comedy magic, routines that appear to go wrong before they go right, making people laugh before wowing them. Amanda was his assistant for a time, and together, they would perform at the annual fair in London, Ontario. He got better over time, Dibbs said, melding sleight of hand and distraction techniques with a hefty dose of humor to keep audiences entertained.

He wrote two books on magic, one of them focused on magic and the Bible, and was subsequently admitted to The Magic Circle, a British organization for magicians.

Life at 100: Every day a new experience

These days, Dibbs has lost his dexterity. "I've got no use in my fingertips," he said. "I can't even shuffle a deck of cards now." He also finds it difficult to write, which he used to do at length. It's frustrating, Dibbs said, but he uses a voice-to-text computer program to get the words on the page.

After a whirlwind few decades in Ontario, Dibbs and Margaret found their way to Sun City West. They settled first as snowbirds, then full-time residents. Dibbs lives in the same condo they bought in 1992.

His second retirement came in 2018, and this time, it stuck. The year before, in November 2017, Margaret had died. They had a great marriage, Dibbs said. She was intensely supportive of him, at times regarded as something of an "unpaid curate" in his various church positions, as well as looking after their kids.

Losses accumulate over 100 years, and Dibbs has lived a life rich with other people. It hurts every time, he said. But Margaret was the hardest loss of all. "It took me a long time to get over," Dibbs said. "Of course, 69 years is a long time. And we had a wonderful life. Two wonderful children."

Life at 100 involves a lot of technology, of which Dibbs has been a keen adopter ever since his wireless technician days during the war. He uses a smartphone, Apple watch and Zoom. There's the newspaper, too, and puzzles to keep his brain active, and watching sport, particularly his old football club, Manchester United, on TV.

Other than the inevitable frustrations of old age, he is in great health. But those looking for the secret to longevity won't find it with Dibbs. "I've always been sports-minded," he mused. "But no, no reason why."

Nor can he easily identify a happiest moment.

"That's hard to say," Dibbs said, before a pause. "I have just enjoyed life all together, really. Every day is a new experience."