

A Gift of Sight: Faith, Hope, and the Gift of Life

By Ben Cronin, former Holton St Peter resident

For those who remember my family from our years in Holton St Peter between 1992 and 2013, you might recall my twin brother Will and me simply as Billy and Benny. Along with our younger brother Jamie and our mum Pam, we were a quiet fixture of village life for two decades.

My dad, Ben Cronin, is buried in the churchyard at Holton. His story, along with our family experience with organ donation, has recently become unexpectedly and deeply intertwined with my own.

In 2011, Dad died suddenly. I can still vividly picture Mum, Will, Jamie, and me gathered around his bed in the Intensive Care Unit at James Paget Hospital, holding on to every final moment as someone we loved so dearly slipped away. There are moments when words fail entirely. Yet right in the middle of that overwhelming heartbreak, a nurse gently asked whether we would consider donating his corneas.

We said yes. We wanted an act of love to have the final word on a devastating day.

At the time, we could never have imagined that fourteen years later, I would be waiting for a corneal transplant myself.

The Journey into Darkness

At 34, I live with advanced keratoconus, a condition where the cornea gradually thins, weakens, and changes shape, causing severely distorted vision. Over time, my sight deteriorated to the point where it fundamentally altered my daily life. I had to make the painful decision to give up my work because it was no longer safe, and I am no longer able to drive.

Everyday tasks that most people take for granted, such as reading a street sign, recognising a familiar face across the road, or simply navigating a bright room, became exhausting, frustrating, and at times frightening.

There is a profound loss of independence that is difficult to describe until you walk through it yourself. Now, whenever I travel alone, I must prebook passenger assistance just to navigate stations safely, relying on a guide to help me find the platform and board the train.

For months, I have been on the waiting list for a penetrating keratoplasty, which is a full thickness corneal transplant, waiting for the single phone call that would tell me a suitable donor cornea had become available.

Ironically, as I sat down to write these very words, that long awaited call came through. I now have the date for my surgery. In a detail that feels far beyond mere coincidence, my operation is scheduled right in the middle of NHS Organ Donation Week.

Answering the Call to Love Our Neighbour

Organ Donation Week is a dedicated time across the UK to raise awareness and encourage families to talk openly about their wishes. Right now, thousands of people in our country are waiting for a life transforming transplant. Every single day, someone's parent, child, partner,

or friend waits by the phone, praying for a call like the one I just received, a call carrying the power to restore sight, health, and a future.

As Christians, we are called to embody compassion, selflessness, and practical love in every aspect of daily life. While modern organ, tissue, and blood donation is not explicitly named in Scripture, its guiding spirit is woven into the very heart of the Gospel message.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus showed us that love is not merely a feeling, but an active, physical commitment to alleviate human suffering. In John 15:13, He gives us one of the most powerful definitions of Christian love:

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Choosing to give a part of our physical selves so that another human being might live, walk, or see is one of the most profound, tangible reflections of Christlike love we can offer. In 1 Corinthians 12, St Paul pictures humanity as interconnected parts of one single body, entirely dependent on one another and called to share in each other’s joys and sufferings. When one part of the body hurts or stumbles in darkness, the rest feels that pain; when one part is healed, the whole body rejoices.

Organ, tissue, and blood donation gives living expression to this spiritual truth. It is a gift given unconditionally, without knowing who will receive it or what their background might be, serving as a quiet, selfless act of grace extended to a stranger.

When we look to the Nativity story at Christmas, we celebrate the ultimate mystery of the Incarnation: God giving His Son to the world. The Nativity is a story about light shining in the darkness, a priceless gift given out of pure love to a humanity in need. At its heart, Christmas reminds us that God gave of Himself to bring healing, hope, and restoration to us all. Organ donation mirrors that same spirit of selfless giving. Just as the angels proclaimed hope to a dark world, a donor offers an unspeakable gift of light, life, and renewal to someone sitting in their own shadows.

When we consider both the Nativity and the Easter story, we are reminded that death and darkness never have the final word. Out of loss, God brings new life and resurrection hope. Through donation, even as an earthly life comes to its end, an act of Christian generosity can bring light and renewed life into someone else's darkness. It is an act of faithful stewardship, returning the gift of our bodies to help heal God's creation.

This spirit of compassion and giving is not unique to Christianity. Across the globe, major faith traditions share this deep reverence for preserving life and serving those in need. In Sikhism, the core principle of Sewa, meaning selfless service, strongly encourages organ donation as a noble gift of life. Judaism teaches Pikuach Nefesh, the fundamental principle that saving a human life overrides almost all other religious commandments. Within Islam, Hindu traditions, and Buddhism, leaders and scholars consistently emphasise that acts of charity, mercy, and saving life are among the highest virtues.

NHS Blood and Transplant works closely with leaders across all major UK faiths to ensure that individual religious beliefs, traditions, and burial rites are fully honoured throughout the donation process.

Yet beneath all the theology and medical science, there is a raw, humbling emotion that is almost impossible to process. Waiting for that phone call means living with the quiet knowledge that my donor could be anyone. They could be an older person who lived a long, full life, or someone tragically young, cut down in the prime of their youth with so much left

undone. They could be a parent, a child, a spouse, or a friend. I do not know who they will be or the life they lived, but I know that somewhere, a family is weeping over a chair that will now always stay empty.

To realise that my restored sight will come through someone else's final breath fills me with an overwhelming mixture of heartbreak, awe, and reverence. It is a gift so heavy and precious that it can only be received with deep humility.

A Sacred Gift Between Two Families

Waiting for a donor organ carries a weight that is hard to put into words. A transplant is not just a routine medical procedure; it is a sacred bridge built between two families. For my sight to be restored, another family somewhere will have faced the unbearable grief of saying goodbye to someone they loved.

In 2011, my family stood in those exact shoes beside my dad's bed at James Paget Hospital. Now, all these years later, I am on the receiving end of another family's extraordinary generosity in their darkest hour.

When I look through my new eye after recovery, I hope to gaze out at God's creation, including the mountains, the oceans, and the faces of those I love, with a heart full of awe. I will carry immense gratitude not only for the medical teams, but for the soul who gave, and the family who had the courage to say yes.

A Conversation That Changes Everything

Sadly, despite the immense good that donation achieves, there are times when a person's wish to give is never realised. Even when an individual has joined the NHS Organ Donor Register, or holds a quiet desire in their heart to help others after death, the final decision in the hospital always involves their family.

In those devastating, high stress moments in Intensive Care, families who are unprepared, gripped by shock, or overwhelmed by fear can feel unable to consent. Often, in their heartache and confusion, or simply because they never knew what their loved one truly wanted, families decide to say no. A choice made in sudden grief can overturn a person's silent hope to be a donor, leaving potential gifts of sight or life unfulfilled.

That is why this Organ Donation Week, I ask you to reflect on what giving life or sight means to you, your family, and your faith.

Please take a moment to sit down with your loved ones and have the conversation. Let them know your wishes clearly. NHS Blood and Transplant reminds us that families are always consulted, and knowing your explicit decision removes a heavy burden of uncertainty and agonising guesswork during a time of sudden grief.

Fourteen years ago, my family had that conversation beside Dad's bed, and we said yes. Very soon, because another family knew their loved one's heart and made that same compassionate decision, I will receive the gift of sight.

One simple conversation, rooted in love and faith, truly can bring light to someone sitting in the dark.

To record your decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register or to read more about faith and organ donation, please visit organdonation.nhs.uk.