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She may have been most famous for her exceptional voice, but Aretha Franklin was also a very wise woman who said: *When I’m not on stage I’m the woman next door*. She took great delight in singing but had no hesitation in recognising it as a God given talent. Her life in the spotlight seemed glamorous but her most powerful songs were those that drew on the struggles of life both personal and political. She knew that her most appreciative listeners were no less familiar with hardship and pain than with the extasy of love. And her troubles came early in life. Her mother died when she was a child, her father may have been a respected preacher but he was also a philanderer and Aretha herself had two teenage pregnancies. Add to this her struggles with addiction and obesity… No wonder that she said: *I've been hurt hurt bad. I might be just twenty-six, but I'm an old woman in disguise twenty-six goin'on sixty-five*.But rather than being defeated by her problems she continually confronted them, she never stopped learning the lessons of life*: Trying to grow up is hurting. [she said] You make mistakes. You try to learn from them, and when you don't, it hurts even more*. This is the wisdom that comes from living as a disciple. We are none of us paragons of virtue, we are those still willing to learn from Jesus.

Being real, confronting what was wrong in society, being honest about her own struggles and pain using her talent to bring solace and courage to others; these are the characteristics of a very wise woman. She never allowed her fame to disconnect her from her solidarity with those in pain, those facing discrimination, those suffering abuse and those who struggle to reconcile faith in Jesus with the raw energy of human passion.

Sometimes this was done on the stage but she never lost contact with her churchand her relationship with Jesus has been the bedrock throughout her life. *As she said: My faith always has been and always will be important to me*. *My heart is still there in gospel music. It never left . . . I'm gonna make a gospel record and tell Jesus I cannot bear these burdens alone*. Here again is the wisdom of knowing that trying to deal with the struggles of life needs friends, and Jesus is our dearest friend.

You could say that Aretha Franklin’s life has been one that took account of Paul’s encouraging words to the Ephesians in the second reading: she was alive to the realities and used her intelligence to ensure she was never defeated but remained strong and resolute. She certainly continued to sing her soulful music so that others might recognise God’s goodness and love.

Her strength and generosity of spirit are reflected in the personified wisdom of our first reading. Wisdom, the woman who builds her own property, the woman slaughters her own livestock, the woman presides over a community the woman prepares a banquet, and offers hospitality to those who still struggle. Aretha has constructed her own distinctive dwelling and produced a legacy not in bricks and mortar but in recordings resonant with truth and honour and hope. Many of those paying tribute to her in a society that has become disconnected from its religious heritage know there is something more and that Aretha had it, even though they cannot find words to describe it.

So, when she said that away from the stage she was the woman next door, Aretha Franklin was in no way belittling her talent or misreading her influence and impact on others; she was reminding each one of us that we too have the capacity to find the truth in the midst of life’s struggles. We might not have to live our lives in public as she did, but we too have hearts that can be fixed as well as broken, we too can find release in returning praise to God for the beauty and joy of life.

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