

## Funeral Homily for Rhona McKeon – 21/07/2004

As we come together today we express words of comfort to each other because we are in need of comfort as we feel the separation brought about by Rhona's death.

In our need for comfort it is helpful to look to the words of today's readings which Rhona chose herself some time ago.

In fact Rhona gave careful thought and preparation to this Mass and she compiled the booklet over the past few months.

The words of the readings today gave comfort and meaning to Rhona in her long struggle with terminal illness.

The first reading reminds us that "Happy are those who die in the Lord – that they can rest after their work since their good deeds go with them."

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is an expression of trust that God will lead us through the difficulties of this life and through death itself to where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Beatitudes which Rhona chose for the Gospel gives us, in the words of Jesus, a list of qualities or virtues which are worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven.

A mere glance at the Beatitudes shows us that they are a complete reversal of worldly values.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit" – those who put their trust in God rather than in material things – those who are dependant on God's help.

Over a long period of time Rhona had to surrender much of the independence that all her contemporaries enjoyed as her illness progressed.

She gradually became dependent on Paul and Nicole, who with nursing and medical support cared for her so beautifully in her own home.

During this time she also placed her trust in God and drew strength and reassurance from the sacraments.

It was a difficult time for her and not without some questioning on her part as she moved into and out of remission at various stages.

But at the end of the day she would always place her trust and hope in the words of Jesus "Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

As we look through the remainder of the Beatitudes – happy the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for what is right, the merciful, the peace makers and so on – we would recognise many of these qualities in Rhona's life.

These are the things that Jesus said are the badges of a true disciple.

They are the things that make us rich in the sight of God.

They are also the keys to another world.

The result of living the Beatitudes gives us worthwhile things in this life – things such as peace, goodness, joy, love, compassion, mercy, gentleness, integrity and freedom of spirit.

But they are only a foretaste of the good things to come.

A person who lives according to the Beatitudes, as Rhona did, is already living as a member of the kingdom Jesus came to establish.

Eternal life is simply the fullness of life in the kingdom of God.

We, Rhona's family and friends, who have been inspired by her life, pray today that we will be reunited with her in the kingdom of heaven where all tears and sadness are wiped away.

21 July 2004

RHONA RACHEL McKEON nee PEARCE

This eulogy was started 2 years ago, when we were told to prepare for Rhona's funeral. Neither the medical profession or her family and friends understood what a fight she would put up.

I met Rhona for the first time when she arrived in Australia in 1970, fresh from experiencing life in London and Bangkok. She was a very good looking and sophisticated package and I couldn't believe she would have fallen for the sort of lines I had heard Paul use before he left Australia 5 years earlier. Obviously travel had improved his chatting-up talents.

It was some time later that I learned that Rhona had been born on a farm in the wilds of Zululand in South Africa. She was one of 6 children and saw little of her father, as he was overseas in the war. She spent her early years on the farm before going to boarding school as a very young girl. There she was placed in the gentle hands of Irish and English nuns. She did not have an easy childhood, but Rhona was an intelligent girl and she won lots of bursaries, which got her through secondary school and teachers college.

After graduating from Teachers College she worked as a school teacher in and around Durban before deciding to go to London for a year. She stayed in London for 9 years, with a couple of short trips back to South Africa.

In London, she worked for the International Marketing Director of Europe's largest advertising agency when she ran into a brash, young Australian advertising man named Paul, who thought he should have been the International Marketing Director of Europe's largest Advertising agency. Paul worked for the same company, but his desk, as he was a "junior", was a long way from the exclusive directors' suites that Rhona occupied. Fortunately for Paul and Rhona, Paul hadn't been in England long enough to appreciate the niceties of the English class system and didn't realize that junior colonial executives didn't wander around the Directors' offices, chatting up their secretaries.

They had a fairly volatile relationship for a year or so until Paul decided he was going to work in South East Asia and off he went. Later that year, Rhona received an air ticket and an invitation for a holiday in Bangkok. The rest is history. They were married twice in Bangkok (one was a civil ceremony and the other was a religious ceremony) and I'm reliably informed that the two receptions caused a huge loss of productivity amongst the expatriate community. By way of an aside, Paul's mother, a very religious woman, believed Paul when he said he and Rhona remained celibate until after the religious ceremony. Rhona and Paul stayed another 2 years in Bangkok and traveled around Asia, courtesy of Paul's employer, Thai International Airlines. Rhona learned passable Thai and acted as a buying agent for a few Australian silk importers. She also succeeded in speaking passable "Strine" for the regular family get-togethers.

She enjoyed a very cosmopolitan lifestyle in this fairly exotic city and made many good friends, - some of whom are here today.

Sean was born in 1970 and Paul & Rhona decided that, with a child to worry about and the North Vietnamese Army only a short march away, it was time to try living in Australia and returned to Paul's home town of Sydney.

They bought a home on Sydney's northern beaches and settled into suburbia. Nicole was born in 1972. By this time Rhona was a busy young mum adapting to life in a strange country and learning how to run a home while keeping two young children alive.

They decided on a change of lifestyle in the late 70s and Paul took on the job of Coffs Harbour's Tourist Promotions Manager. Rhona and the kids arrived in January 1978 and started a whole new life. She found the 10 acre farm that they bought west of Sawtell and where they lived for over 20 years. Rhona became chief gardener and mother to 3 - 4 horses, numerous calves and cows, dozens of chooks and 3 dogs, all of which she looked after with love and care.

My favourite farming story about Rhona concerned a large, over friendly bull who broke the fence to visit some of his young, virgin cows. Rhona rode to their defence in her trusty VW Beetle, which she drove between the bull and the virgins. Being at such close quarters to a large, noisy & amorous bull was very scary, but she managed to chase the bull out of the paddock. It is not known whether the cows were thankful or not! But the tail-pipes/dual exhausts of the Beetle were never the same!

Rhona supported Paul through the tumultuous years of The Banana Republic and the even more tumultuous years of Bonville Beach Hardwoods. She found the public brawling that both jobs involved fairly stressful, as she was a private person who shunned the public spotlight.

In the mid 1980s she was diagnosed with a brain tumor. She survived this major operation and first demonstrated the incredible courage that she had in the face of death.

Rhona enjoyed the beautiful environment in which she lived and was always eager to get out and explore it. There are very few lookouts or forest tracks within a 100 km. drive that she has not seen, or could not comment on knowledgeably. She was also very keen on fishing and spent many Sundays on the local creeks and rivers, feeding the fish – an experience I understand on a first hand basis, as Rhona and I would regularly wonder what fresh caught fish tasted like!!

Rhona had a great many strengths and virtues. She found the time to help a lot of people in the community. She was on various school committees; a long term Meals on Wheels volunteer and for years also visited many lonely people in hospitals. She was intelligent, kind, thoughtful, generous and a great conversationalist. She also possessed great courage and class. She has fought cancer for over 6 years with hardly a word of complaint. She has given new meaning to the term “A positive outlook” and demonstrated good humour to the end.

Rhona really believed that every day is important and urged all, in her latter days, to make the most of it. Many of us pay lip service to this concept, but Rhona really understood it and tried to live it. In the last few months, when she was not able to get out, she stressed to her family that they should not take a single day for granted.

Rhona has been a good friend to Colleen and Janette, Paul's sisters, and everyone else in our extended family. She has always both practised and preached tolerance and understanding - if you've ever seen some members of the family after a few bottles of red, I am told by people who remember these things, that your average saint would have trouble being tolerant!!

She refused to let the cancer get on top of her and over the last 6 years she and Paul did 2 extensive trips – one to far North Qld. And one through Victoria to Adelaide and back through Broken Hill. Rhona organised to stop at the prescribed time and have a week's chemotherapy along the way. You don't hear about that kind of touring on all the TV travel shows!

We also had a wonderful holiday in the Whitsunday's on a yacht with Rhona and Paul and Janette (Paul's other sister) and Ian. We managed to run up on to the coral; Paul caught a nice fish on a lure with a couple of trebles. When bringing the fish on board one of the trebles got caught in Paul's thumb – oooh it was hurting us!! Luckily, we had had first hand experience with removing a treble from someone's back on another occasion so we managed to remove it. We had great fun, great food and great company. We are fortunate that the McKeons and their respective spouses all get along. -Rhona has been an inspiration to all of us and we are all very fortunate to have known her.

This occasion cannot pass without mentioning Paul's caring of Rhona. He has been most attentive, understanding, loving and uncomplaining – there is now a St. Paul here on earth!! Rhona, really could not have had a better carer. Paul and Rhona have been comforted and helped emotionally and physically by Nicole who has turned up most nights to spend some time with Rhona and help get her settled for the night, and, emotionally, by Sean. Thank you Paul, Nicole and Sean.

I would also like to thank everyone who has come to-day and everyone who has assisted Paul, Nicole and Sean, in any way, large or small, in what has been a long and difficult time for Rhona, Paul, Nicole and Sean, their extended family and their friends and acquaintances.