

Wednesday 7 February, 2018

*A sermon preached by the Dean, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe
at the State Funeral for Mr Ronald Walker AC CBE*

Today we give thanks for a great Melburnian. In words from Winston Churchill the Premier reminded us that today is an opportunity to give thanks, and be contented with a life lived well. And our three tributes have given substance to that thankful remembrance.

We have heard from Ronald's son, Cameron, about how Ronald cared for everyone, and how his family was central to his life. We have heard from Jeff Kennett and Eddie McGuire about Ronald's achievements in Melbourne and Victoria and heard about his ceaseless activity in putting Melbourne on the map – whether as our Lord Mayor, as Chair of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation for more than 25 years, bringing the Grand Prix back to Melbourne, or as Chair of Melbourne 2006, arranging what many say were the 'best ever' Commonwealth Games – right here in Melbourne.

All three paint a picture of a man who believed in others, invested in others, and who, by his belief and his investment, enabled others to accomplish far more than they could have done on their own. Today, as we give thanks for his life and legacy, we have the opportunity to say thank you for who Ronald was, as a family man, as a Melburnian and Victorian, and as a national luminary.

Ronald was universally recognised. When I met with his family, his wife Barbara told me how me how, wherever he went in Australia, he would be instantly spotted, and hailed: 'G'day Ron', people would say, 'good on you, Ron'. And he would talk to all who approached him.

Ronald was open to others, and today is our opportunity to thank Ronald for this openness, to add our own 'good on you' to that of countless Australians.

The good that Ronald did was shaped by his beliefs. At the heart of Ronald's life stood a very private faith: formed in part at school, Camberwell Anglican Grammar School, and shaped through his eventful life, Ronald prayed regularly; would, when travelling, insist on visiting churches – preferably Anglican ones – and, of course, would frequently pop into St John's Sorrento for a quick chat with God.

I can well imagine Ronald having the kind of conversation with the Lord Jesus that the poet Margaret Fishback Powers imagined taking place in the poem read by Leon Davis. Particularly at those crucial stages in his life, following his cycling accident in Royal Park which required such swift and precise surgery, or after his diagnosis with advanced cancer, Ronald might have had words with the Lord: 'where were you when I was at my lowest, at my frailest'.

And the fact that he asked for this poem to be read at today's service suggests that Ronald, too, might have shared the experience of the poet: the assurance that it was at those

moments when we are at our weakest that we are in fact upheld, strengthened by the God who carries us through life.

We may not be aware of God's presence at the time, may in fact feel isolated, left in the dark, but it can be those very moments of frailty or illness, that prove to be the greatest moments of change for us.

For Ronald, the lease of new life he gained after his cancer diagnosis, made him into a ceaseless advocate for the advancement of microsurgery and cancer research. 'If it helped me', he might have thought, 'it should be available for all'.

And in characteristic fashion, he went to do something about it: raising awareness and much needed funds; barracking for the medical profession in the same way in which he had done so for this City, this State, for Formula One racing, and sports and culture in general. If something could be done to make things better, Ronald would give that a shot.

The man who famously walked 25km a day would have well understood what the writer of our second reading, from the letter to the Philippians, meant when he wrote, at the end of *his* life, about life in terms of a race.

'Friends, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on for the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God'.

The author of these words, St Paul, wrote in the early years of the Christian era. Paul had barracked for others all his life, worked to share the insight that God is, indeed, with us when we are at our weakest and frailest: 'when I am weak, then I am strong', Paul wrote.

His advocacy and his faith had landed Paul in hot water, led him to be under house arrest in Rome, as he awaited an audience with Caesar to whom he appealed for his freedom. That freedom never came: Paul died under arrest.

But while he was constrained in movement, he used his incredible passion and energy to write to others about Jesus Christ, and the conviction that in our suffering we share Christ's suffering so that – whether we live or die – we might also live Christ's life; share in a life that is forever, a life that is complete.

Paul loved athletics. He probably would have been delighted to have attended the 2006 Commonwealth Games here in Melbourne and would certainly have added his own 'good on you, Ron' to ours.

Because Paul was as passionate about training and sports as he was about Jesus Christ, and the new life Jesus brought through his death on a cross, he speaks of life in terms of a race.

We run a race, we train to race, Paul tells us, so that we may gain a prize. Yes, it may be satisfying to compete just for the fun of it. But it's even more satisfying to compete when there is a great prize to be obtained at the finish line.

The goal for Paul is to be with Christ. The prize for Paul is for all people to respond to the call to be with Christ.

He trains others to run with him in this race of life, teaches all who care to hear his message to compete alongside him, 'so that, on the day of Christ, I may boast that I did not run, or labour for nothing'.

Paul knows that it requires strenuous effort to succeed and win in racing. And he tells his listeners to put in that time and effort, by training themselves in prayer, by training in giving of themselves to others, and by training in doing their best so that many may race with him across the finishing line.

'What are you doing today?', Ronald's family would frequently ask him. And depending on whether the questioner was his wife Barbara or his daughters, he might either answer 'as little as possible' or 'my best'.

Well, we know that Ronald never did 'as little as possible'. He always did his best. And as a person of faith, he, too did his best: entering into the race of life with the intention to win.

And the prize he has won is the greatest gain of all, Paul tells us in our reading: 'Christ will transform the body of our humiliation' – the body that can suffer illness and is subject to death – 'that it may be conformed to the body of his glory' – Christ's glorious resurrection body, that Paul himself encountered in that amazing vision he had at the beginning of his own race as a follower of Jesus.

So we give thanks for Ronald, and his life. As we celebrate his accomplishments among us, we give thanks especially that he entered and ran the race of eternal life.

The race that has a heavenly prize. Which is the realisation that in the times of our weakness, of our illness and frailty, God carries us across the finishing line.

Just as in the times of our achievements and glory, he enables us to reflect some of *his* glory, and all 'by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself'; the power of life restored and life transformed in Jesus Christ. It is to this life that we commend Ronald, and in this hope that we comfort one another in our loss.

And just as many Australians praised Ronald when they met him, 'good on you', so we trust that Christ, with whom he raced in *this* life, will add his own, 'good on you', as he welcomes him into the next – and thus gives him the grandest prize of all.

Now unto him who made us in his image, and gave us new life by his own life, to Christ, our Redeemer and Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and power forever. Amen.