

JUNE 2011 FAREWELL TO JOYCE MARY RENSFORD – AGED 90 – PICS AT THE END

Elizabeth and I arrived back home from Zimbabwe two weeks ago. Many of our e-friends are already aware that my mother (Joyce Rensford) died after a rapid decline in health while I was in Zimbabwe. She reached 90 last January, and had lived a full and fulfilled life. She was ready to leave (what the Apostle Paul called in 2 Corinthians 5:1) her “worn out tent / body” behind and head on over to book in for her new, younger, resurrected body and existence! Way to go!

My last time with her before I left was very poignant. We were together alone, and spoke about her imminent death. For Christians, these issues are nothing to be afraid of or avoided. She even made me laugh at some things she said – but at least she spared me the agony of rearranging yet again the Order of Service for her “Memorial Celebration Service” that she insisted take place after her worn-out body was cremated. “I don’t want a funeral! I don’t want a coffin in the chapel (at Cardinal Gilroy Village where she lived the last 8 years). I don’t want mournful piped music; I want our church musicians to play lively, joyful music!” And so on... Well, Mum got her wish(es)... after changing the Order of Service over 25 times in the past 5 years! The staff were tremendous there (as were the staff at Westmead hospital in her final week). The service went for 2½ hours - so many people queued up to speak about her and the impact she had made on their life.

Family members (local and from interstate – bloodline and church family) were with her every moment for her final three days on Earth. She stopped breathing while her granddaughter (Tamara) was singing a song of praise beside her early in the morning. Elizabeth was still in Australia and farewelled her loved mother-in-law – before joining me, after Loxley and I returned to Zimbabwe from a rough ministry trip into Central rural Mozambique. She arrived exhausted, sad, but relieved she had been there when Mum died.

When I left Aussie, Mum and I knew we would not see each other this side of eternity, and said our goodbyes before I flew out. She was happy for me to go (and not return for the Celebration Service). I was so glad to have been able to live close by her for most of the past 33 years since she arrived from New Zealand and began a slow painful journey to wholeness in a new country.

Two anecdotes to finish... Mum regularly came with me to watch the AFL Sydney Swans play (across the other side of town nearly 40km away) until she was around 75. When they played away she would watch them upstairs when she lived with us. One Saturday afternoon, Elizabeth and I were doing some marriage counselling with a couple we didn’t know who had had us recommended to them by a fellow minister. At one serious point in the counselling, there was a loud stream of abuse from upstairs. Our visitors were somewhat alarmed as a disembodied voice yelled, “oh no! You idiot! How could you call that a free kick”?!?! What rubbish!” I smiled knowingly and said to them, “it’s ok. It’s my elderly mother; it sounds like the Swans are getting a hard time from another Victorian umpire”.... They nodded with that look that says, “this is a weird home”... Sadly, we never did see them again....

A few days before she died, a nurse in her ward approached one of our church ladies who was part of the constant bedside watch and said how unique Joyce was to the staff. Why? Because she not only continually thanked the doctors and nurses who were treating her, but continued to **thank the cleaning staff as well!!** Right up to two days before she died! Very few people even notice cleaners; they are often regarded as being at the bottom of society’s pecking order... But not to my mother. What a legacy to leave behind you.... I hope I can live up to her high standards of warmth, openness, and respect for the “little people” whom we all encounter day-by-day.

This afternoon, Elizabeth and I fulfilled her final wish – for her ashes to be scattered in Parramatta Park near where the running club I have attended for 29 years assembles every Friday afternoon. In modern, so-called “enlightened”, and regulation-hidebound Australia, it was probably illegal to do that, but she didn’t care. She so enjoyed being there every Friday with our dog(s), Elizabeth, and my jogging and walking friends. Up and down the finishing straight with her walking frame at 88. Then coffee alongside Parramatta River with Terry (from Christchurch – regaled with stories from home – especially after the earthquakes), Vic (still active at 92 – one of the few people she had to look up to!), Norma and Louie (the owners of the café who made a fuss of her), Garry, Joe, Dennis, Dot, and many others.

Elizabeth and I finally managed to hack open the sealed container and scatter her ashes in the garden beside Salter’s Cottage - the oldest colonial building in the country (built before 1800). A brief prayer of thanks for her life, some tears, and a promise - *Tichaonana munguva pfupi* – (Shona for) “we will see you soon.”

Later update - Thanks to everyone who responded to the farewell (*update above*) to my late mother (Nana Joyce); there were so many emails, we struggled to reply individually to them all. It was very moving. During the last week, I spoke at the monthly ecumenical service at the retirement village she lived in for the past seven years, where I have functioned as an honorary chaplain for some 13 years. Her desire was to leave a living memory, not a gravestone behind her. And it showed in the many comments made about her this week. Elizabeth and I finally got to watch the DVD of the memorial celebration too – all 2+ hours of it! By all reports it was the longest one ever held there (and there are 400 residents!) - so many wanted to say something at it (young and old). The staff and residents were pretty gob-smacked by that alone. Not to mention the tasteful humour that several people introduced!

The youngest speaker was one of her great-grandsons, Jordan (6). With his mother’s help he read his own eulogy for her – recounting among other things how that, since he started school, I would pick him up at 3pm, and drive (sometimes, I must confess, via McDonalds....) to Nana’s, where I would throw him up and over her balcony rail, then heave Toby Rensford (our King Charles Cavalier dog) over too, and finally I would have to hoick my own creaking bones up and over. At which point Mum would yell out, “who’s that on my balcony!?” in mock surprise (she had been waiting for an hour), and then let us in. The ritual continued - I would make her and me a cup of tea, while Jordan raided her lollies and chocolates drawer! (with her tacit permission of course)....

This kind of stuff meant little to me when I was middle-aged; but it now means so much on my day off from church stuff. Hang on! It **IS** church stuff!

In Zimbabwe last month, I was teaching in several places on the issue, "if you knew you had just one week left to live, what would you be thinking and speaking about?" Football results? Election results? Bank interest rates? Your PB for 10k? Impending death focuses the mind onto what is really important. Jesus deliberately addressed the big issues in what is often called the Passion Week – His last week on Earth with His disciples and His own family before he was murdered. And yes, He **did** speak long and clear on the necessity of living in an environment of **LOVE**. He also equally stressed to His followers that they couldn't do that without the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.

Elizabeth and I are still working on it.... We hope you are working on it too along with us.

Mum would be proud of you too.....

Some cameos of Mum's last four months....

Jordan praying for Nana in her last year of life



Joycey with one of her adopted grandchildren – Chido 2011



<<< Mum, three sons, and youngest great-grandchild at her 90th – Jan 2011

Joycey's 90th surprise guest – Jerry Scarf came all the way from her childhood in Christchurch! (via shepparton) >>>





family portrait at Joyce's 90th – Jan 2011



Keith's introductory speech at Mum's service May 2011
it! Here asking Kefas for help to translate some Shona in a eulogy....



Gavin Watts mc'd the celebration service – all 2+ hours of



Memorial service musicians led a lively praise time!