

Qualities of Heroic Teachers''

CCHE Graduation Speech, 27 April 2001

Two days ago our country stopped to commemorate and celebrate the achievements of those who have suffered and died in the service of our nation. Anzac Day was marked with the expected pomp and ceremony, with ordinary people putting on special uniforms for the occasion, and marching in procession with pride and solemn dignity to pay tribute to the blood,

sweat and tears which have been shed to make our world a better place for all. Rows of hard-earned medals were displayed proudly on the chests of those who had served, honouring them for their bravery, their valour, their selfless courage and dedication to the cause in some of the most stressful situations imaginable.

In some ways there are parallels between Anzac Day and the ceremony for which we are gathered here tonight. I'm not trying to suggest that our schools today are like battlegrounds, in spite of what John Aquilina might have us think. But we have come dressed in special clothes, and marched in procession with solemn dignity, to celebrate the achievements of a small but important group of teachers, who have committed themselves beyond and above the call of duty to the task of making our world a better place. Those of us who have come along tonight as observers and guests salute you for all your hard work and selfless service to the cause of Christian education. For some of you it may have felt at times like you were shedding blood, sweat and tears, as you sought to undertake study on top of a demanding job.

I trust that as you come tonight to be honoured for your efforts, you will feel that the sacrifices have been worthwhile, and that you have become not only better teachers, but better people as a result.

Thinking about Anzac Day and the parallels with this graduation ceremony set me wondering about what sort of medals might be awarded to a Christian teacher to commemorate their years of service, what sort of qualities might be celebrated in this way. Some of you may feel that valour and bravery in highly stressful situations are just as relevant for a teacher as for a soldier! However, I have picked out three particular qualities which I think are important for all those who seek to follow Christ. They are not things which we would normally think of in connection with heroism, and yet they each demand a certain type of courage and deserve special recognition.

The first type of medal which I envisage is for the person who has lived generously. We are well used to being exhorted to give generously for a wide range of causes, but living generously goes well beyond just financial considerations. At one level it may well mean having a generous attitude in relation to the gifts and resources that God has bestowed upon us. In many cases I think Christian teachers are typically strong in this regard, giving selflessly of their time and talents for individual students and for the school community as a whole. However, living generously not only involves what we have and what we can do, but who we are and how we respond to other people. As the well-known Australian art critic Robert Hughes has pointed out, we tend to live in a culture of complaint, in which we are quick to point out the failings of those around us. Especially when we are tired or stressed, it is easy to complain about specific people or situations, to cast aspersions on those around us and to believe the worst of them. Whether it be a parent, a pupil or even the school principal who becomes the focus for our frustrations, it is a common failing to be ungenerous in our perceptions and judgments.

Living generously, however, involves refusing to think the worst of people, preferring to see them in a positive light. It means making the effort to find good in those people who might otherwise aggravate us, and valuing them accordingly. It means having an open heart which is not quick to judge, but which is willing to be patient and look for the opportunity to dispense a healthy dollop of

grace. To be sure, there may be times when our generous spirit is taken advantage of, and we open ourselves up to hurt. But if we can have the courage to resist the temptation to join the rest of the world in its selfish, ungenerous ways, in spite of the potential for hurt, then I believe we can do a power of good to impart life and a renewed, healthy spirit into the people and communities around us.

A second medal which I would like to see awarded is for the person who has loved extravagantly. Many of us have been shaped by the Protestant work ethic, which stressed hard work and a sober, thrifty lifestyle as the keys to godly virtue. While there is much to be said for honest endeavour and careful stewardship of our resources, I think in some ways this attitude has also infected our spiritual lives, so that we are afraid of unseemly extravagance or undue passion in the way we express ourselves. Yet if there is any one area in which we have a right to be extravagant, it is in our commitment to love one another. So many people in our world, so many students in our classrooms are suffering from a deficit of love; yet if the spirit of Christ is at work in us, we should have a deep spring of love available to minister to their needs. To put a cap on that spring, for fear that it might be unseemly or counter-productive to express love in all its strength and beauty, is to quench one of the most important resources which our heavenly Father has given us to make a difference in this world.

On Anzac Day we are often reminded that there is no greater love than this, that one lays down one's life for a friend. Within the classroom or in our day-to-day lives we are seldom called to lay down our lives in a physical sense, but it is still true that there are things that we must lay down if we are going to love extravagantly. Things like our egos, our prejudices, our sense of status, our need for power must be laid aside if we are going to model Christ-like love, for it was he who left behind all the glory and honour and power which he deserved in order to demonstrate love towards us. In the midst of the busyness of the classroom, when the teacher sometimes feels caught in the cross-fire of parental expectations, crowded school calendars and unruly children, it can take a huge effort to leave behind the protection of our own self-defence mechanisms, in order to love without condition or complaint. Those who succeed in filling their lives and their teaching with an exuberant and selfless love, no matter what the circumstances, are indeed heroes worth celebrating.

For those of you who are not too sure if you can be extravagant lovers, then there is still one further medal to aspire for those who manage to hope unflinchingly. Hope is another of those commodities which is often in short supply within our communities. Social analysts tell us that depression will soon be the largest health problem in Western society, and at the root of depression is a lack of hope in one's circumstances. In many ways, the prevalence of depression is a sign of failure for the myth of happiness that prevails within our society. That is to say, we have an innate belief that life should be happy, and we spend our whole lives trying to ensure that we are comfortable and that nothing unpleasant can happen to us. In short, we have sought to eradicate suffering from the human condition, yet in the process we have simply eroded the very resources which would enable us to cope with suffering.

The Bible reminds us, however, that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. As Christians we have no cast-iron guarantee against suffering; but we do have a basis for hope no matter what our circumstances. If we are to be a light in a world which is afflicted by the darkness of depression, then we need to learn to cultivate hope in our own lives, and to offer a sincere and genuine hope to those who are gripped by despair.

To hope unflinchingly is a courageous act, because it requires looking beyond our negative circumstances to a promise of redemption and renewal. It means accepting our inability to solve our problems ourselves, combined with a willingness to believe that our heavenly Father has our very best interests at heart. It requires us to sustain our faith that God works all things for good in our lives, even when the present reality seems too much to bear. To know the truth of God's goodness, and to be able to convey that truth as a source of hope into the lives of those who feel discouraged

and broken, is indeed to perform a valiant service for the good of the community at large.

Tonight we have come I fancy dress and marched with joy to present the accolades that are due to those who have worked long hours and studied hard in pursuit of their God-given calling to be teachers. While this occasion represents many things, it is perhaps a foretaste of another great celebration, when we will march with pride down the streets of gold to receive our heavenly crowns of honour. I trust on that day that among this very band who are graduating here tonight, there will be medals emblazoned with the citations: lived generously; he loved extravagantly; they hoped unflinchingly. Then there will be cause for great jubilation indeed.

► *Student Response*

RESPONSE ON BEHALF OF THE GRADUATES

Graduation Ceremony for College of Christian Higher Education - April 2001

RON INGLIS - CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY HIGH, REGENTS PARK

I am delighted to have the opportunity of responding on behalf of the graduates of the Institute for Christian Tertiary Education. I have been with the institute for six years now, firstly studying for the Graduate Diploma in Education Studies and now completing the Masters programme. My association continues as I serve on the governing body of ICTE.

First I want to take the opportunity of paying respects to all our lecturers, tutors, curriculum officers, library staff and administrators who have taught us, encouraged us, directed our reading, been sympathetic when deadlines were looming, assessed us with compassion as well as honesty and overall gave us a most worthwhile and challenging education experience.

The comments you wrote on our essays and assignments were always helpful even though at times we needed a little reflection to see them that way! We thank you for your commitment to teaching and to challenging us in Christian education.

Secondly I want to applaud the dedication Christian Community Schools has had to rigorous academic endeavour right from its beginning.

I have been at Christian Community High at Regents Park for 17 years so it was way back in the early 80's that I saw the advertisement for a Social Sciences Coordinator at CCHS. Now I confess I had some misgivings. After all, Christian Schools were fairly new and little was known about them. Moreover there were a few strange ones around!

I thought are these people into serious scholarship or is this a light weight outfit run by a bunch of religious fruitcakes?

I need not have worried. It was clear that the Rev Bob Frisken and the schools he was developing were very much concerned with academic excellence. Knowledge and learning were important. Staff and students were encouraged to expand their horizons, to think deeply and critically about all issues, to gain as higher qualifications as possible, to think and act Christianly, not with a narrow, closed mind but with one that accepted the challenge of defending the Gospel to the highest academic levels.

In the early interviews Bob spoke of his vision for Christian Teacher Training Colleges and a Christian University. I thought this was a little ambitious. After all CCHS was then a small school with few resources and no buildings to call its own yet the Principal was talking about Christian Tertiary education!

Well the vision certainly developed into something of value and substance and tonight we witness just a little of the fruits of those who have laboured long in the cause of Christian higher education.

Thirdly I want to express my personal appreciation for the courses and the ways they have helped me grow as a Christian teacher. As you can see I am a mature age student and let me state that it was difficult at first to get back into the books, to get the old grey matter working again and to find the time to do the required study. But what an enriching experience! I am glad I was confronted with the hard questions:

‘Is there such a thing as Christian education and if so what are its distinctives?’

‘What is meant by a Bible based education? How is the Bible relevant to what I do in the classroom?’

‘To what extent is teaching a pastoral ministry?’

‘Are my everyday teaching practices shaped by philosophies which are not Christian at all and does this matter?’

‘Should a Christian School have a distinctive Christian curriculum and if so what exactly are its features?’

‘What exactly is a Christian school? Should it be any different from the secular High down the road and if so in what way?’

And so on.

I am grateful for the experience of tackling these issues and seeing their relevance as each day I take on the challenge of being a Christian teacher in the classroom and in the wider community of the Christian school.

Thank you.