

CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF Thelma Neville 17 Feb 2018

(sermon preached by Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter)

Prayer

God of the living and the dead:

May your grace be sufficient for us, for if we have YOU, we have all we need.

May your love enfold us

Your comfort embrace us

Your peace fill us

For we ask these things, in Jesus name. Amen

Introduction

Jesus said: "Do not let your hearts be troubled and upset. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms...I am going to prepare a place for you. And I will come back, and take you to be with me that you may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" ..I am the way the truth and the life (paraphrase John 14:1ff)

These are well known words of Jesus, spoken to his anxious disciples shortly before his death. Words Thelma and I read, discussed and reflected on together many times when I visited her. Words that gave her great comfort and joy - especially in these final years when she became increasingly aware that one day her life on earth would end. Words that helped her not to be afraid of the future, but to place her life in the hands of Jesus –the one who had gone ahead to prepare a place for her, and would one day come back to take her to be with him ,in his Father's house.

On 18 July 2017 she and I spent an afternoon together discussing and planning the details of this of celebration and thanksgiving for her life. We sang lustily all her favourite hymns; identified people to be involved, decide on roses for the flowers, she said I must wear pink....When it came to the choice of the scripture readings there was no doubt in her mind - this passage from John was the one she wanted. She called it "My favourite". She frequently quoted some of these words to me when I walked through the door to see her.

These Words from John's gospel came to pass on Sunday night, when Jesus came – just as he had promised – to take Thelma by the hand and lead her gently to her eternal home. In answer to prayer (she was growing tired and was ready to die), Thelma slept peacefully that afternoon taking her last breath on earth before filling her lungs with celestial air and waking with renewed life and energy in her new home. *“When I awake and see you as you are, I shall be satisfied” (Ps. 17:16)*. No doubt she was welcomed by her beloved Geoff, her sister Gwen, Vaughan's dear Molly, all who arrived there long before her.

Nearly 102 years old!

More than a whole century!

What a long, rich and full life it was!

Thelma will go down in history as being one of Grahamstown's legendary figures! (She seem to have been involved in just about every conceivable committee that ever existed in Grahamstown; knew everybody; had socialised with the rich and famous as well as the ordinary folk; interviewed and met all sorts of people in every sphere of life ranging from Presidents and Prime Ministers to academics, women of all nationalities. She was a most successful and highly competent journalist and organiser of conferences along with everything else she had done. She initiated English/Afrikaans women's tea gatherings, stood in silent protests with women of the Black Sash. What a life! What a legend!)

Surely she must be one of the most extra-ordinary and remarkable people I have ever had the joy and privilege of meeting. No doubt we have all been blessed and enriched in some way through knowing her.

Today we gather, united in our love for Thelma, and in thanksgiving for her life

It is appropriate, as Thelma requested, that today be a day of celebration – giving thanks to God for his goodness and mercy. It is a time for us corporately to give thanks to God for the gift of her life, well lived!

Having said that, Thelma gave me strict instructions that only Nickie could speak, if she wanted to. “I don't want a whole lot of speeches about me” she said.

Thank you for your wonderful tribute. You were the daughter she never had. Only **you** could get her to hand over her drivers licence at the age of 99 years old, after the famous debacle in the PnP parking lot!

Only **you** (with Vaughan) could show 'tough love' and be firm with her and make difficult but necessary decisions on her behalf – yes she said you were “very bossy” – but she respected you and knew that you always looked after her best interests. Thank you for all you meant to Thelma.

Apart from being told I had to include the John 14 reading, Thelma also told me I should include a few funny stories and anecdotes– so people would laugh. Let me obey my instructions....

When I first met Thelma about 10 years ago, I must confess I was somewhat intimidated by her! She would sit next to Michael Whisson (also quite intimidating) and keep an eye on the time. At the end of the service she would tell the preacher exactly how many minutes the sermon was! In her books, longer than 8 min was too long! (an impossible goal for me to attain though later she relaxed that rule and told me I was worth listening to!).

The story is told (by Michael W) how 22 years ago, during the 7.30 am service, the then Dean committed the unforgivable sin in daring to congratulate Thelma on her 80th birthday. Well if looks could kill, I believe he would have died instantly. Only when she reached a century were we officially allowed to know her age. And what a party that was. For months afterwards, she remembered how much she had enjoyed it – especially dancing with Vaughan (Vaughan, thank you for being her special brother whom she loved so much. She often expressed deep gratitude for the way you looked after her, managed her affairs and finances, and cared for her. She so valued you and your dear Molly. The only complaint to me about a week before she died, was that you visited too often and she was worried about all the travelling!)

She often spoke so warmly and lovingly of her husband Geoff, and laughed as she recalled how he first made a move in her direction because **he fancied her legs!** He clearly was so proud of her and so affirming of all she did – and she often told me how '*he made me walk tall*'.

I will always treasure the many times we drank tea together (not whiskey or brandy like her and Michael!), and shared in the Eucharist in her home once she was no longer able to get to church. What a gift to talk about matters of faith, to pray together, to read and reflect on the scriptures. I was inspired by her deep love for God, her sincere and genuine faith, her daily prayers said while looking out through the window onto her garden in the evenings.

The more I got to know her, the more I marvelled at the many gifts and talents God had given her, and the way she put each one to good use for the benefit of others. She was quick to seize every opportunity that came her way. For me, she was a role model of someone who lived out her faith in every aspect of her life. *There is so much more that could be saidbut Thelma is timing me!!!!*

I know for certain that each one of you here has your own special memories of Thelma, and your own stories to tell of life shared with her. If we had an 'open mic' I am sure we would be here for hours, telling our stories and sharing our memories! (But that would certainly incur the wrath of Thelma). Will be time later at the Monument!

We are united in our deep sense of shared loss

Even as we celebrate, we cannot escape the fact that today is also a day of sorrow and mourning. We are united in our deep sense of shared loss. Even though she had such a good innings – it's hard to believe she is no longer with us. Grahamstown just won't be quite the same without her!

Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*" (Matt 5:4).

Two of the most liberating words for me, found in the NT, are simply these:

"Jesus wept" (Jn 11:35) (the context being the death of his friend, Lazarus)

Jesus gives us permission to grieve. Even though she has lived a long life, and her death was something of a relief, it is still hard to face the reality that she is no longer with us.

We are particularly mindful of you, Vaughan and your family at this time, of her nephew Michael and his family overseas, her special friends – Michael Whisson,

Colleen Arderne, Monika Gaybba, Nickie & Glen, Lousie and her many dear friends who were particularly close to her.

We as a Cathedral family will also miss her very much indeed.

May God enfold us in his comfort and his love as we mourn her passing.

We are united in our common faith, and hope, and trust in the risen Lord Jesus

We are united through Thelma's faith and ours – a faith, hope and trust in the loving, risen Lord Jesus.

In our NT lesson from Romans we read:- *"If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's"* Either way, we are with the Lord. It's a "win-win" situation!

Yes, we grieve today, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope.

St Paul wrote: *"We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him...And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thess 4:14,17-18).*

Thelma lived a life of faith and trust and obedience to the risen Lord. She looked forward to the day she would enter her Father's house.

We know that one day we shall also go to the place prepared for us by Jesus. We shall be raised to life with Jesus, and be reunited with Thelma and all those who have gone before us, living and dying in the Lord Jesus. We shall join the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). The life that began here on earth will continue in a new life beyond the grave; the gift of eternal life we have received through faith in Jesus, life in all its fullness, abundant life - will be more fully manifest to us as we see him face to face. That is surely the good news of our Christian faith!

Oops My time is up. (sorry Thelma – I was more than 8 Mins – 15 to be precise!)

Dear Thelma, farewell. We thank God for you, and for many ways we have been enriched through knowing you. We shall miss you.

"Well done good and faithful servant –enter the joy of your Lord".

May you rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.

