

Ken Petersen

Requiem Mass Homily , 22 June 2020

During a visit to Ken at Mary MacKillop Aged Care about 10 days before he died, as he was coming to terms with the reality that he wasn't getting better and that he was reaching, as he put it, "the end of the road", I asked him how he was feeling about things. He replied that he was feeling "very vulnerable". As we continued to talk, it became obvious that he wasn't just talking about his physical state, but he was referring particularly to his spiritual reality. He realized that he was in the hands/arms of the one we call God. He appreciated that he was without power and control in terms of his own destiny and that what was left to him was to surrender completely in trust to the love and mercy of the one whom he believed loved and accepted him unconditionally. Sitting with him and observing him during the last week of his life, Ken's serene and peaceful demeanour, even though he became increasingly less able to communicate, betrayed that he continued to surrender to this power and mercy and love of God until he breathed his last early in the morning of Saturday 13 June.

I visited Ken a few times during his final days but Sr Kathleen Murphy did so constantly and heroically. Kathleen, as we know, was a great companion and support to Ken over many years and particularly during the past twenty-four of their shared ministry in the *Sancta Sophia Meditation Community* at Warburton, where they touched so many lives. We are grateful for those who form part of that community who are able to be present in person with us today and for those who are joining us "virtually". We regret that we are unable to gather physically in the numbers we would have liked, but

appreciate your understanding in this matter and look forward to an occasion when all who would want to can gather in person to remember and honour Ken and the great ministry that he and Kathleen offered at Warburton.

Kathleen continued to be a special source of comfort and support to Ken throughout his various stints in hospital over the past couple of years and especially in his final weeks at *Mary MacKillop Aged Care*. On behalf of the Carmelites and, I'm sure, too, all who loved and respected Ken, I offer you our sincere thanks, Kathleen, and trust that you will continue to be supported by your and Ken's many friends as you come to terms with his leaving us. I thank, too, our province Health Care Coordinator, Andrea Dillon, for her unstinting efforts to support Ken and Kathleen, particularly in the last couple of years, in doing what was best for them as they came to terms with Ken's increasing frailty. The support of nursing staffs at Ringwood Private, Knox, Maroondah and Healesville Hospitals and finally at *Mary MacKillop Aged Care* is also something for which we are very grateful.

To return, though, to Ken's acceptance of his "vulnerability" as he approached the end of his earthly life ...

On reflection, it struck me just how significant it was to hear Ken "own" his vulnerability. It is something to which the Gospel calls us, as we are reminded in the Beatitudes which we heard recounted for us a few minutes ago. To be poor in spirit, to be gentle, to mourn with those grieving, to hunger and thirst for what is right, to be merciful, pure in heart and a peacemaker is to be vulnerable. These beatitudes all require of us a "handing over" of ultimate power and control in our lives to another in whom we trust and whom we believe loves us unconditionally. This vulnerability requires of us a genuine

humility and an openness to the wisdom and truth of another. It calls forth from us an acknowledgement that we aren't all wise or all knowing or of unlimited talents and in ultimate control of our lives - and that we need the support and collaboration of others in order for our lives to be rich and full. Our vulnerability calls us to be open to others honestly, but lovingly, and this is risky. It exposes us to hurt or shame or ridicule – being “persecuted in the cause of right”! But as Jesus told his disciples in that famous Sermon on the Mount, happy – or blessed - are those who cultivate these beatitudes, who allow themselves to be vulnerable before themselves, others and God, because “the kingdom of heaven is theirs”.

Ken's acceptance of his vulnerability, whilst it struck me when I heard him express it near the end of his life, was something that I realised on reflection, was really an expression of how he had lived his life. He was a communicative and collaborative person, open to and thirsting for knowledge and manifestations of the spirit in all sorts of ways and from all sorts of sources. His great love of Carmelite spirituality was something that he both cultivated and shared throughout his 58 years in the Order and his 52 as a Priest – today!. It led him to search deeply for wherever the spirit might be manifest ... in nature, in literature, in music, in art and architecture, in human ingenuity, in people themselves, in spiritual movements, in the search for and promotion of justice and peace, in the ecumenical movement and especially in the pursuit of interfaith dialogue, to which he especially devoted the last twenty-four years of his life.

Ken was grounded in the search for truth, the search for God, modelled by the great biblical hero adopted by the Carmelites as a “spiritual father” – the

Prophet Elijah. We heard the pinnacle of Elijah's search for God recounted for us in the First Reading today where, on Mount Horeb, he encountered God in "the sound of a gentle breeze" (or, as expressed in other translations, "the sound of sheer silence"). On the day before Ken died, the Reading we have recalled today was the Reading at Mass – and Mass was available as a livestream from the Mary MacKillop Chapel to residents' rooms. Whilst Ken was very unresponsive that day, Kathleen had the Mass playing on the TV and she recalled how Ken became alert when this particular reading, with which he was very familiar, was proclaimed. The last thing I did before leaving him that day was to read it again to him and I, too, detected a level of alertness in him that was otherwise missing altogether. This search for God in the silence meant much to him. It meant he listened, he tuned in, to wherever this presence of God could be detected. He was vulnerable enough, open enough and silent enough in the deepest recesses of his heart to sense the spirit of God in himself and in all that surrounded him.

Ken's other great love in his spiritual search was the other great icon of Carmelite spirituality – Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In his final days, Ken had Kathleen play for him at the end of each day the Carmelite Marian hymn, "Flower of Carmel". It is a time-honoured Carmelite tradition to end the day with this prayer. We'll sing it as the last element of our celebration today as we process Ken out of the Church, but Kathleen played it for Ken as the last thing she did before leaving him late in the night before his death in the early hours of the following morning. He woke in the embrace of the God he loved and the spiritual mother from whom he drew inspiration and protection.

Ken lived in and grew in the spirit of vulnerability throughout his life. As I've already reflected, it is a basic gospel virtue and it has been reinforced for us in recent times through the teaching, preaching and actions of Pope Francis. He has spoken about a "revolution of tenderness" and he has made many gestures which reveal him practising the tenderness he speaks of. He has made the proclamation of God's mercy integral to his pontificate. He has been indefatigable in promoting his belief that justice and peace is the result of tenderness and mercy. This desire for justice and peace of which Ken was an enthusiastic and committed champion is a desire for reconciliation and the restoration of right relationships. It requires that one becomes vulnerable, that he or she is willing to risk losing face or looking weak and being subjected to merciless criticism and even rejection. This is the logic of willing vulnerability that was practiced by Jesus and which Ken appreciated he was called to practise in his own life. Ken was a faithful follower of Jesus and we honour and thank Ken for the inspiration he gave us to follow the path of truth and wisdom ourselves.

Throughout his long years of searching and service as a Carmelite and a Priest, Ken gave of himself generously, wisely and wholeheartedly in many different ways. At various times and in various places, including here at Middle Park, he served in parish ministry as a Parish Priest or Assistant. For a number of years he was very involved in the formation of younger Carmelites and as Prior of our House of Studies at Donvale. When not directly involved in formation ministry, he retained a great interest in it - and in supporting his fellow Carmelites in their initial and ongoing formation - and his wisdom was often drawn on by those more directly responsible. Ken's enthusiasm for and support of the *Carmelite Library of Spirituality* and the *Carmelite Spirituality Centre*, both of which are located in the Hall adjacent to this Church, was also

something that reflected his interest in learning, especially in matters of the spirit. Ken was a member of the *Karith* House of Prayer community for a number of years (long before *Sancta Sophia* days), giving special witness to prayer and the importance of the spiritual life, whilst supporting many others in their spiritual journey. Ken was a great supporter of and advocate for the Lay Carmelites. He was principally responsible for supporting their maturity in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council as a group who lived Carmelite spirituality as lay people. Ken was also elected to serve as Prior Provincial between 1985 and 1988 and was especially committed to promoting both initial and ongoing formation in the province during that period. It was, however, in his final ministry as co-founder and director, with Sr Kathleen Murphy, of *Sancta Sophia Meditation Community*, with its special focus on inter faith dialogue, that he developed a real passion and to which he made a most significant commitment – evidenced by the Kathleen’s Eulogy a little while ago.

At the Mass almost two years ago to celebrate Ken’s 80th birthday and the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination, I was also privileged to give the homily. I think it bears repeating today that I recalled then that Ken’s and Kathleen’s *Sancta Sophia* ministry was a prophetic ministry, very much in the spirit to which Carmelites are called after the example of the Prophet Elijah. I said: *In their commitment to, involvement in and promotion of inter-faith dialogue, they have immersed themselves in a critical prophetic movement in our times when so many tensions exist in our world because of the divisions that keep people apart on the basis of their faith. By their openness to other’s understanding and appreciation of God, by their welcome to everyone and anyone, no matter their faith, race, sexual identity, wealth, social status or whatever, by their reaching out to help others know themselves and their God,*

they have witnessed prophetically to our common human search for meaning and relevance in our lives and we thank and salute them for it.

As we gather today to bid farewell for the time-being to a man whose company was bright and engaging, whose spirit was energetic and indomitable, whose learning and wisdom was rich, whose love and support was real and whose vulnerability enabled him to reach deeply into his own soul and relate profoundly to others, we are sad that he is no longer physically among us. In the way Ken would want, however, we are gathered in our faith in our God's love for us and in the goodness in all God's creation. We thank God for the blessing that Ken's life has been for us. We pray that, as the Prophet Elisha shared in the spirit of his mentor Elijah and carried on his mission of proclaiming God's kingdom of justice, love and mercy, we might continue to draw inspiration from Ken's life in our call to witness to and contribute to the building of that kingdom on earth. May the gentle, merciful compassionate and vulnerable person that is Ken Petersen rest in eternal peace.

Paul Cahill, O.Carm.

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