

Michael Jeffery

Funeral address by Tom Frame (29/12/20)

Many things have been said about Michael Jeffery over the past 10 days. He has been lauded by both the Murdoch and Fairfax newspapers, and by Skynews and the ABC – a rare feat these days – for the things he did – and you have heard about them during this service. But what of Michael Jeffery the man? Curiously, the media tend to focus predominantly on conduct – what a person does – but rarely concentrate on character – who a person is – although character usually illuminates conduct. Having heard that Michael Jeffery did many great things, I want to explore what we might learn about greatness of character from Michael's life. I will take my cues from the two Bible readings: Psalm 139 and Matthew chapter 13.

Like all of us, Michael was shaped by a range of factors and forces, influences and inspirations. But any compelling account of Michael's life must take account of his Christian faith because it formed his character and informed his conduct. His faith was not an intellectually formalised set of assents to a series of philosophical propositions although he had sound reasons for the things he believed. For Michael, faith flowed from a deep inner conviction that he embodied the creative energies of God, was fashioned in the image of God, and reflected the purposes of God. That being so, he was effectively brother and sister to every living person – they were entitled to respect because they too disclosed the hand of God and had intrinsic worth. Further, this world was God's handiwork, it exuded divine glory and conveyed a sense of the transcendent, the numinous and the divine. The world, too, had intrinsic worth. Human beings were, therefore, stewards, and not owners, of the natural order. This way of seeing both other people and the earth was the foundation of Michael's energetic, if not unrelenting, sense of duty. Things were required of him; he had obligations ... to those he encountered and the natural order in which we all live. As he discovered how richly he was endowed with aptitudes and abilities, his sense of duty gradually expanded and his

capacity to make a difference in God's world and in people's lives was ever enlarged. Here was a man who stood apart from others; a man worth contemplating as a guide to what human beings might become.

So when we ask: of what is greatness made? I look at Michael's life for pointers and then I reflect on Psalm 139 which is laden with ageless insight and timeless wisdom. The Psalm speaks to us and our times - and it spoke to Michael.

In the psalm we get a glimpse of a God who is generous and compassionate, of a God who is not hidden or remote but self-revealing and near. In this psalm we have a window into human identity and destiny, affirmation that human beings are intended and not accidental, and we encounter in its refrains an outline of the power and purpose of living. The psalmist is deeply touched that such a God has blessed this world and he is moved to worship in praise and thanksgiving. There is one other important element we should not overlook here: and that is humility and the vantage point it offers. The psalmist also stands in awe and announces: "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand." In the years I have known Michael Jeffery, I have found him to be a truly humble man - thinking no better and no worse of others ... because they are brothers and sisters, and offspring of the same God.

And so I come to the conclusion as I think about Michael's life and ponder the psalm: there is surely no greatness without humility. As a character virtue (and tragically an unfashionable, if despised, virtue), it was humility that made Michael an effective Army leader and an effective civic figure. He drew pleasure and satisfaction from the achievements of others, especially within his family, as much as his own, possibly more so. He was able to lead well, because those he led, knew he would not deride their actions nor deprecate their accomplishments. Rather, he wanted those he led to flourish, convinced that whatever others might achieve, those things would never diminish him. This is true greatness and the very essence of service.

It is unsurprising, then, that Michael was a follower of Jesus – the Galilean itinerant teacher who emptied himself of all but love and took the form of a servant, and washed his follower’s feet. As I have observed, Michael looked within and saw the divine imprint ... but he also looked beyond and observed the life of Christ. The words and works of Jesus helped Michael to make decisions and overcome difficulties, knowing that his frailties and failures, like those of the first disciples, would not see him cast aside or rendered redundant. The reading from the 13th chapter of Matthew’s gospel is, therefore, also foundational in coming to terms with the character of Michael Jeffery. As Michael was dying and I thought about his living, this parable came to mind – partly because he served as the National Soils Advocate and partly because he was an exponent of the Christian message.

This portion of Matthew’s gospel is usually titled as the ‘parable of the sower’. Well yes, but it is actually the ‘the parable of the soil’. It is a curious story, and unsuccessful on one level, because the rather dull disciples don’t get the point and Matthew helpfully includes the interpretation from Jesus just in case we don’t get the point either. This parable has many dimensions. For me, it highlights the importance of foundations – the sources from which we derive sustenance, the places where we are nurtured and the factors that influence our growth.

Michael heard and heeded the teaching of Christ. He did not hide his Christian convictions; deny them for the sake of advancement or modify them to attract popularity. His foundations were in the good soil and we have all reaped the harvest of his thoughtfulness and dedication. He is one of the few men I have ever thought about, or spoken of, as an ‘upright’ man. He managed to adhere to values and virtues that reflected the pattern of Christ, despite the trials and temptations that cannot be avoided in professional life. When we see or hear of a public figure being criticized for bad behaviour or indicted for official misconduct, there is a collective groan and the inevitable question: is goodness still possible in such a fallen world? Is anyone upright? Can anyone stand tall? I have

always looked to Michael as the upright man who stood tall ... and I attribute his stature to its foundations in Christian belief. It was his following of Christ that drew him into selfless service and drove him to look for new ways of effective serving, even when he had turned 80.

During his life, Michael would be most uncomfortable to hear of us speak about him in these terms. The words would be waved away – because of his humility and because he would point to Christ and say, follow him: the foremost disclosure of divine love. And having followed Christ in life, when his life was ebbing away, he was prepared to follow Christ into death with both courage and composure. This was not a last resort nor desperate optimism. Why so? In the recent Christmas celebrations, the message was that God took human form and came among us to offer a pattern of living that exemplified selflessness and sacrifice. The same infant born in Bethlehem is the Jesus who was crucified on the Friday, and the same Christ who was risen on Sunday. He triumphed over death and the grave to affirm there is more to this life and this world. Christ proclaimed in word and deed that resurrection and eternity are viable hopes; going where we cannot yet go, and giving an account of what is there.

This truth cannot be grasped by the finite mind; it is acquired by faith ... faith in the character of God who promises resurrection; faith in the Christ who told his followers he prepares a place for them. When people ask me what the Christian faith is, in essence, all about, I point them to these truths. They are sublime and unsurpassed as the source of hope in an often bleak world, and one left poorer by Michael's passing from us.

Today, however, we give voice to our heartfelt appreciation for Michael's life and legacy, his goodness and his greatness, as we commend him and his future to the God who gave him life and who now receives it back into divine custody where, by faith, we believe Michael remains in a tender embrace for all time. Thanks be to God. Amen.