

Parish Church of Saint James
King Street, Sydney

Homily delivered at the Memorial Service for

RUTH MARGARET McCANCE (1968-2019)
1 July 2019

Bad weather is not the only obstacle those climbing in Nepal have had to face. After Chinese-controlled Tibet closed the long-standing climbing route to the summit of Everest in 1949, Nepal imposed restrictions permitting only a few expeditions to Everest each year.

But even then, other factors, such as weather, were to frustrate the preparation of numerous expeditions. It was not until the British expedition, led by John Hunt which finally reached the summit of Everest in 1953, that the mountain was conquered.

It was, of course, Sherpa Tenzing and Sir Edmund Hillary who actually made that final ascent. Hillary had been recruited to the expedition by Hunt, who had described him as, “quite exceptionally strong and bounding in a restless energy, possessed of a thrusting mind which swept away all unproven obstacles.”

A determination to sweep aside unproven obstacles must be a characteristic of anyone who sets out to climb Everest – as many do today. But the sheer number of those making the attempt is now attracting some controversy. The number of those dead or missing on the Nepalese side of Everest stood at nine by the end of this year’s climbing season.

Of course, Ruth was not on Everest. She would have known full well that most deaths on the mountain were attributable to exhaustion and physical fatigue - made worse by the crowded route to and from the summit. And I suspect that Ruth would have found something distasteful in the transformation of Everest into a “bucket-list” adventure.

Ruth was, in fact, far from Everest, some 800km away. She was in the Indian Himalayas. Not, as widely reported in the media, on Nanda Devi East – the second highest mountain in India.

Rather, Ruth was making an attempt on the lesser known summit known simply by its height in metres above sea level: Peak 6477, a peak which Trent described to me as, “utterly unremarkable.”

And this, I think, is very significant. Ruth knew her limits. She was not climbing in Nanda Devi National Park to tick boxes. She was there to challenge herself.

But she always set herself challenges that, whilst daunting enough for you and me, were nonetheless within her careful estimation of her own capacities and strengths. Nanda Devi East, itself, she believed, was beyond her – at least on this expedition. Hence, Peak 6477.

I think this really is testimony to Ruth’s resilience and strength of character. How easy it must have been to think while there, “What the heck: I’m here. I’ll give it a go.” But no. Ruth knew what she could push herself to do; and she knew what she could not do.

And she trained and trained, and ran, and climbed, and exercised her body and her mind in order to reach a higher level of fitness, and so prepare herself. It was not only the climb itself, but also these strenuous preparations that were part of the personal growth and self-understanding that Ruth was pursuing. Nothing done casually; nothing left to chance.

Ruth had stopped climbing when she turned 30; but at the age of 47, she changed her mind and started again. I wonder why. Well, Ruth has told us. She believed that being able to change one’s mind about something – that is, to change one’s mind’s view of the world and one’s abilities – was to open up new ways forward in life.

It was, she wrote in her blog, “about identifying and addressing our fundamental beliefs and assumptions which silently shape all our decisions and actions. With awareness, we can consider if they still serve us or those we care about, and, if not, replace them.” Her ambition, she said, was “to be in wild places that nourish my spirit.”

Ruth knew the risks involved in climbing. One of the reasons she stopped twenty years ago was that she felt was brushing too close, each time, to what she foresaw as “an inevitable accident.”

It was not that the risks had dissipated when she resumed climbing. What she felt had changed was her mind's view about her own competence and resilience.

Ruth was a young woman still in the fullness of life. And now that life is over. It is indescribably sad that she is no longer with us. Her loss is deeply mourned by all of us, but by none more so than Trent, her husband, with whom she exchanged wedding vows in this very place back in August 2006.

But is there any hope, any word of Good News here for us this morning as we gather to remember Ruth before God and to give thanks for her full and abundant life? I believe that there is. Of course, a word of hope is not to be mistaken for a word of explanation. Human beings have been seeking explanations for the tragic and unexpected in all ages.

But the word of hope, which is set before us in that reading from Ecclesiastes, our first reading, is that even those events or circumstances that are beyond human reckoning or understanding do not fall beyond the providence of God. God, in other words, embraces meaning even when all sense of meaning completely eludes us.

The writer asserts that the ways of God are, indeed, inscrutable to humankind for we cannot comprehend why the same fate befalls the good and the bad, people and beasts. Death ignores all distinctions between the fit and the infirm, between the young and the elderly, between those who live with an eye to the future and those who do not.

And yet the writer of this extraordinary book speaks clearly about what God has *done*, about what God has *given*, and about what God *completes*. "He has made everything suitable for its time," says the writer. "He has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning."

We can know the facts of history, in other words; we can even have a sense of the immediate future. And yet we can still fail to grasp God's role in history. But our failure to grasp that role, that purpose, does not mean that it does not exist. Our failure does not mean God is absent when tragedy – untimely and undeserved – erupts.

This will strike many in our contemporary society as delusional nonsense. Yet many others, whether they are Christians or belong to another religious tradition, will know that to speak like this is precisely what it means to talk about *living by faith*: having *confidence* in God when explanation eludes us; having *trust* in God that the promises of God are never broken.

“For now we see in a mirror dimly,” says St Paul in what is perhaps one of the most famous passages in Christian scripture. “But then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully.”

I am certain that Ruth – who committed her life to the pursuit of understanding, awareness and fulfilment, both for herself and for others – I am certain that Ruth would have grasped this truth.

For her, that intellectual, spiritual and emotional dynamic between “now” and “then”, between today and tomorrow, between the past-infused present and the future was the very dynamic of life. And I think she would want it to be the dynamic of our lives, too.

In our grief and in our loss we may be bewildered, confused, and even angry. But Ruth would say that we must move from the present to the future, from the perspective of “now” to the perspective of “then – precisely what she meant when she told us about the importance of “expanding our mind’s view of the world.”

Today, in our loss and in our grief, we see dimly; but tomorrow, with our hearts and minds open to the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven, we shall see face to face.

The Reverend Peter Kurti
1 July 2019