

## RALPH FOSTER'S EULOGY - March 2020

Today we remember Ralph Foster and give thanks to God for

- calling him into his kingdom when he was a young man
- then for using him throughout his adult life to benefit those he befriended
- and now for taking him into eternal glory.

Ralph touched the lives of many people here, and interstate, and overseas.

Some of the words in his eulogy are from you, his friends, and some are from Ralph himself.

He told me he was the second of twin boys born in Yorkshire one month premature in March 1936.

He weighed just over two pounds and as his chances of survival were low, he was hurriedly christened.

He was christened Cedric not Ralph.

No one knew why he was christened Cedric but when his father found out he was mortified.

How could George Foster front up to his workmates with a son called Cedric?

So what to do?

Well a month or two later, when twin brother Malcolm was to be christened, Cedric was slipped in as a job lot and re-christened Ralph.

He thought his parents arranged it that way to get two for the price of one.

Ralph recalled that as they grew older, he and Malcolm went to three different Sunday Schools, reluctantly, it would appear, as they didn't really like being there and eventually were expelled from all three for fighting.

However, Ralph must have absorbed some of the Bible teaching because like the scientist he was to become in later life, he thought about it and questioned it.

But try as he may he could not convince himself that God was the Creator of the universe and he drifted into a Dawkins-like atheistic view of life and its evolution.

It was not until he studied botany at Leeds University in the UK that his views began to change.

It happened when he met two Christian scientists on a botany field trip.

They explained the majesty of God through the beauty of a flower and that somehow appealed to Ralph's intellect and made him re-assess his belief in God as Creator.

With that new spark of interest playing on his mind one night when he was doing chemistry homework on the electronic structure of the benzene ring he suddenly concluded that if he could believe in electrons that he could not see, and no one else could see, he could believe in the unseen God.

So there and then he knelt down and committed his life to Jesus - his Lord and his Saviour.

That was in 1955 when Ralph was 19 years of age.

In 1959 Ralph graduated from Leeds University with first class honours in Botany, and by 1962 at the same University achieved his doctorate.

You may have heard that Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain.

He fell in a puddle up to his middle and never went there again.

But he did go to Australia

With his university qualifications and his expertise in electron microscopy he was invited to work with the CSIRO in Melbourne.

Thrilled to be selected by the CSIRO but anxious about leaving home for the first time in his life Ralph prayed fervently that God would find him a suitable church and a Christian home on the other side of the world.

But first things first.

On arrival in Australia in 1963 Ralph decided that he, as a fledgling scientist, had to have a white coat to wear in the laboratory, so off he went to the CBD of Melbourne to buy one.

Not sure of his bearings in the city, he was taking a short cut through a carpark when two policemen nabbed him and accused him of stealing hub caps.

After protesting his innocence in his broad Yorkshire accent the policemen said very slowly and deliberately

"Do you speak English?"

A week later Ralph again got himself lost in the big city and this time was rescued by a young man wearing a Scripture Union badge.

While they were speaking about which church Ralph could join the young man said he rented a flat located above the house of an Anglican church couple and as he was about to go overseas suggested Ralph move in when he moved out.

So only 2 weeks after arriving in Australia Ralph's prayer to find accommodation with Christians was completely answered.

One of Ralph's closest Christian friends in Melbourne and fellow scientist was Dr Keith Weller. Both were boarding at Ridley Theological College in 1965 when the Principal of the college, Dr Leon Morris, was negotiating with the University of Melbourne for Ridley to become a University College. One of the conditions for that to happen was that Ridley had to produce tutors for secular university students studying medicine and pharmacy. Yes, you guessed it. Leon Morris chose both Ralph and Keith to be those tutors. It was a happy task that continued for around 10 years. Keith said Ralph's witty and thoughtful tutorials made him very popular amongst the students. In a book recording the history of Ridley University College between the years 1965 and 2005 Ralph is quoted as saying "My time at Ridley was the happiest period in my life – mainly for the rich intellectual contacts with like minds, and the rich Christian fellowship"

Meanwhile Leon Morris had more than tutoring university students in mind for Ralph. He was impressed by Ralph's excellent Bible knowledge and effective teaching skills so when a theological student was unable to preach at a Sunday service, Ralph was sometimes appointed in his place. Ralph thrived in this environment and by the early 1970s was preaching from the pulpit as often as every second Sunday.

When Ralph transferred to Adelaide in 1974, he redirected his preaching skills into Bible teaching at various Trinity Church programs and at home group meetings.

But before we enlarge on his Trinity involvement and other Christian works in Adelaide let's look at some of Ralph's scientific achievements.

To the people who are here from CSIRO this morning - welcome and thank you for coming. From the information some of you kindly supplied I think I am right in saying Ralph was an exceptional research scientist in the field of soil microbiology and was involved in identifying the precise location of micro-organisms in soil particles and on root surfaces which then assisted his research into soil fertility and root diseases in wheat. Much of his research was done with the aid of an electron microscope and he has been known to fall on his knees in the laboratory in awe and wonder at what he saw as part of God's exquisitely detailed creation

I mentioned earlier that Ralph transferred from Melbourne to Adelaide in 1974.

In 1984 while living in Adelaide he was invited to North America to present papers on his research findings and to show how well respected he was just listen to this extract from a letter written from Canada in 1991 - 6 years after Ralph was there.

"Ralph's presentation was one of the most lucid I've ever heard. Everyone is still to this day in awe of his vast knowledge and understanding of the rhizosphere, and with his further publications since 1984 he has become a giant in his field."

And here are reviews from Professors in the USA and the UK.

"Ralph was always one of my heroes and our field of research gained from his insight"  
"His soil microscopy beguiled me as a student and still does – literally visionary"

Let's also hear from the current Senior CSIRO Research Scientist in Adelaide.

"With the passing of Ralph Foster, the scientific community in Australia and all over the world has lost a great pioneer in soil microbiology research"

"He and retired Chief Scientist, Dr Albert Rovira, published a book titled "Ultra-structure of the root - soil interface" which remains today a landmark contribution in the field of plant microbiology"

Ralph was obviously dedicated to his work and gained huge satisfaction from it. And he may well have been flattered by those reviews but we at Trinity know the only review that really counts is when Jesus says to him "well done good and faithful servant".

We at Trinity know that Ralph's dedication to his Lord was greater than to the CSIRO. How do we know that?

Because for the past 30 or more years Trinity church people have been Ralph's family. A family that talks about Jesus, and worships Jesus. A family that on the one hand has greatly benefited from Ralph's Bible knowledge and teaching skills, and on the other, has supported him when he has needed help.

Many of you from the Trinity family have supplied stories about Ralph.

I will mention a few of them, but to get a more complete picture why don't you speak with someone after the service and find out how they remember him.

One story is about Judy Langshaw and Jill Phillips who invited Ralph to attend the wobblys meetings here at Trinity.

The wobblys were people with health issues and disabilities who met to support one another, and to socialise, and to join in Bible studies.

Ralph sometimes led the bible studies and became a favourite with his fellow wobblys.

Ralph with his many health issues had no problem with the term "wobblys".

In fact, he called the group "poorlys".

It was one of the meetings he really looked forward to.

Kay Crawley, a long-term member of Trinity, has another lovely story to tell about Ralph and Gladys, his mother, who came from the UK to Australia to live with Ralph.

Kay and her husband, David, first met Ralph when together they visited schools to speak on the topic "Science and Christianity."

When Ralph later joined Kay and David's Bible study home group their friendship grew so Ralph found it easy to ask Kay a favour when he was about to travel overseas on CSIRO business.

He knew that Kay would be the ideal person to drop in on his mother to see that she was alright.

He also knew his mother would not like to think she was incapable of looking after herself.

So, he devised a cunning plan.

Kay was a talented portrait artist, so he asked her to paint his mother's portrait while he was away. That meant Kay would have to visit Gladys or take her to her own place for sittings.

And that's what happened.

Kay was able to keep an eye on Gladys and at the same time produce a wonderful painting of her.

That portrait was one of the few worldly possessions Ralph valued, and it followed him from his house at Blackwood to the retirement village at Glenside and finally to the nursing home at Kingswood.

He remained a member of Kay and David's bible study group and its successors until only a year or so back when his health made it difficult for him to see, to hear and to remain comfortable sitting on a normal chair.

He had an enquiring mind and was always able to illustrate the Bible studies he taught us with its historical background, the Hebrew or Greek meaning of words and of course any botanical snippets if they were appropriate.

Ralph's friendships were by no means limited to Trinity people.

One of his very good friends is Nick Kuiper who works in the Philippines mission field from time to time

You will hear from Nick soon when he reads the Bible passage from Mark's gospel.

Nick met Ralph in the 1980s and became his pastoral care worker when he was suffering mental issues.

In between his trips to the Philippines Nick made a point of checking on Ralph and over the past 12 months has been one of Ralph's most frequent visitors.

Although Ralph lived frugally, he was generous toward others.

When he found out that one of Nick's cash strapped Filipino students was in need, he financed his trip to Australia to gain a trainee ship and helped him with his botany thesis.

It hardly needs be said that the young student achieved a high distinction for his work.

Ralph also belonged to an organisation called Friends of Belair National Park.

He was involved in the creation of a register of all significant trees in the Park, gave talks to members, and back when he was more mobile, joined in bush walks and field studies.

He was awarded a gold pass by the State Govt Dept of Environment for his contributions.

Ralph's house near Belair National Park was in a gully and to get to the shops he had to walk up a steep hill - and I mean steep - it was a bottom gear job for cars.

He had heart problems which meant he had to stop frequently to catch his breath.

On one of his outings to the shops he blacked out in the coffee shop.

On coming to he looked up into the eyes of the barista who said

"Ralph I'm Gabriel. How are you feeling?"

Ralph's immediate thought was that he was being welcomed into heaven by the Angel Gabriel.

Poor Ralph. That dream was shattered when the barista's face was replaced by those of the ambulance men who bundled him off to Flinders Hospital.

Ralph has never owned or driven a motor car.

He has never bothered about clothing fashion trends.

He rarely had anything in his house repaired, unless his life depended on it.

As I've said before he lived frugally.

But Ralph was prepared to generously give financially to Christian organisations dedicated to the spread of the gospel.

Organisations such as Ridley College in Melbourne, the Bible College of SA, and the Adelaide Show Christian Outreach.

His love of Jesus and his concern that people know about Jesus was evident when visiting shops with him for coffee or to buy his favourite biscuits, Tim Tams.

Everyone behind the shop counter knew Ralph.

He had on previous visits talked to them about Jesus and knew whether they were Christians

Or still to take that step

We all know that Ralph suffered many health issues and physical disabilities.

No one could miss that his right hand was deformed and unusable.

It was the result of a faulty shoulder operation while he was still working at the CSIRO.

Ralph had difficulty coping because he was right-handed and was seriously hampered by this unwanted disability

He wanted to vent his anger on someone and that someone happened to be Max Hart a godly man - a pastoral carer from Trinity

Max suffered from Parkinson's disease and as Ralph saw him approaching - hands shaking\_uncontrollably, his anger subsided.

He said to himself if Max can live with that affliction and still praise God, he could live with his hand and continue to live faithfully.

So how do we sum up the life of Cedric Foster later named Ralph?

- a brilliant scientist – a giant in his field said one of his contemporaries
- a man content to live frugally
- a man who suffered many afflictions sometimes patiently sometimes anxiously
- an eccentric friend with a great sense of humour
- a man with a weakness for Tim Tams and Iced vo vos
- a talented teacher
- a Christian who loved the Lord and was concerned for the spread of the gospel.

Dear God, we give you thanks for Ralph's life