

Homily of Fr Bill Milsted on the occasion of Robert Pearce's 90th Birthday 10th September 2023

We don't normally sing someone's praises until they have been dead for quite a while ... but today I'm going to talk about someone who is still very much alive: Robert Pearce.

I first met Robert in 1979 when I went to the seminary. Robert taught us how to sing the psalms of the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours. In the Psalms we find the whole range of human emotions expressed - hope, fear, anger, sorrow, joy. In the Psalms a voice cries out to God the Father, trying to make sense of the complexity of human experience.

Of course, the voice in the Psalms is really the voice of God because it is the voice of the Word made Flesh. Jesus cries out on our behalf. He is voicing our own thoughts for us. The Psalms help us to learn how to pray. Often, the phrases of the Psalms will express better than we can the sighs of the human heart in its yearning for God. Our vocation on earth is to learn how to be contemplatives: how to worship God and converse with our Heavenly Father in the highs and lows of life, in good times and in bad, in joys and in sorrows, in hopes and fears.

So thank you, Robert, for teaching the Class of '79 at St Patrick's College Manly how to PRAY the Psalms, because that is what you did by teaching us how to SING the psalms with those Anglican psalm tones. As St Augustine tells us, "... to sing is to pray twice". You set us on the road to contemplation.

Now let's track from 1979 to 1999. I'm appointed to St Peter's Parish and, lo' and behold, I discover, much to my surprise, that Robert Pearce is the parish organist and choir director. Danny and Carrie Luke were his main choristers along with Catherine de Luca and others. To Robert's delighted surprise, Danny and Carrie were completely at home with polyphony and chant having been trained from early childhood in PNG by none other than Maria Von Trapp Jr., stepdaughter of the famed Maria Von Trapp immortalised in the Sound of Music.

The miracle that I observed here is one that I have not seen in any other parish. Robert was able to reach out across at least three missing generations and inspire teenagers and young adults with a love for liturgical music and especially the psalms.

Robert, it is not everyday that someone over the age of 70 ... can reach out to young people, gain their confidence, inspire them to come to rehearsals on a weekly basis and teach them skills they did not have. Today, the young adults run the music ministry here at St Peter's and I'm sure it is a cause of immense joy for you to know that a great musical tradition is being carried on.

Robert, you not only know the music of the psalm tones and the words of the psalms (all committed to memory!), but you also know the VOICE BEHIND all those voices. The voice of the Master Himself, the Good Shepherd, Our Lord Jesus Christ. His words stick with us and help us to pray at odd times and even odder places.