



A Tale of Two Lives Moderator's Comments Posted 3 February 2019

By Rev John P Wilson

Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, is a classic. It spans two countries, bringing them together through Dickens' engaging characters embedded in their 18th century lives in Paris and London. Two cities are linked through oscillating themes of darkness and light, struggle and relief, death and life.

My 'story' spans two countries, bringing them together through the compelling testimonies of two lives embedded in Zambia and Australia. Two lives well-lived through hard times and blessing. One served in our partner church CCAP Zambia Synod, the other served the Presbyterian Church of Australia in Queensland. Lives not known to each other, from continents separated by vast oceans, but connected because each was born again into Christ and devoted to serving Christ in the world and in his church.

1. There was an African named Gerald, who after following many things in his youth, engaged his brilliant mind in hotel catering management. Though brought up in Sunday School and church from earliest days his conversion came after a serious attempt on his life. I was never able to get to the bottom of this story, but he'd tell me that there was a plot hatched at work to poison him – sufficiently grave to shock him and to bring his restless heart to God. Which testimony sounds like an old African friend of ours (Augustine of Hippo).

Through various means our loving saviour brought Gerald to be born again into Christ, leading to a life commitment devoted to serving Christ in the world and in his church.

Rev Gerald Phiri was a most faithful, cheerful and intelligent pastor, known and loved by many in our church who have visited Zambia. Buoyant in spirit, his gait was spritely, smile

infectious and warm handshake engaging. He was the man who would first meet me at the airport and travel with me to see that I was safely bedded down in the lodge they had thoughtfully chosen for me. His conversation was lively, he understood and embraced reformed theology and he often conversed about its African application for my benefit.

In hospitality, he was gracious and welcoming. Paula and I last enjoyed his love and care over lunch in his humble and sparsely furnished manse at Mtendere CCAP, Lusaka.

Rev Gerald Phiri is one part of this 'tale of two lives'. At 51 years, we'd say a life cut short – but a life well-lived and lived well to the very last day appointed by God for him on this earth.

One of our African elders, Isaac, wrote, on the day of the funeral: "there were more than one thousand people who came for his funeral and close to 100 Reverends from the different churches. He was one of the few Reverends who could associate with any grouping: the old, middle aged, youth, market people, church people, non-churched. It rained during the burial, but no one cared or moved."

He was one who personified 1 Corinthians 15.58 'Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.'

2. There was an Australian named Ron – a man many of us in the PCA knew and loved. He was blessed with an inquisitive, inventive and brilliant mind. Born and raised in a respectful, moralistic home, this young man searched for some form of moral compass in life, searching for life's meaning. His testimony was that he was converted at the Drive-In.

Yes, that's right ... Ron went to the Drive-In to see A man called Peter. It was a film of the Christian testimony of Peter Marshall, pastor to politicians in Washington DC, that moved him to conversion. Ron was born again into Christ and devoted to serving Christ in the world and in his church.

Ron was a Queensland man through and through and loved the PCQ and served the church at Holland Park, Bell, Coorparoo and as Clerk of Assembly from 2004. Yet his commitment went beyond state borders, serving for decades and with diligence on PCA committees. He was known for cheerfulness and compassion, thoroughness and loyalty. Many of us have been recipients of his out-of-the-blue phone call: "I just wanted to know how you are".

During the difficult days of the 1970s, and especially when the continuing Presbyterian Church was struggling to own its decision to continue and to understand its own identity, we greatly admired Ron's commitment to the task of drawing the church back to its biblical foundation both in content and methodology. Ron Clark worked harder than most. He was simply a powerhouse in the volume of material he produced, much of it written by himself, and the example he gave in showing how the work could be done. Ron was a dear brother to all of us and a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

Rev Ron Clark was a man of enormous energy, passion and artistic creativity. He served the Presbyterian Church of Australia in ministry for 53 years. 84 years well-lived, serving the church 'til the end.

For some, God gives the strength of years to do this. We're reminded how God strengthened J C Ryle to serve as bishop of

Liverpool until he was 84 years of age. Ryle said: "Pray that we may go straight on, even unto the end – that we may never lose our first love – that it may never be said of us, that we are not the men we once were, but that we may go on constantly and faithfully, die in harness and finish our course with joy ... and testify to the Gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus."

It's not a matter of pride in our years: the days appointed for us are appointed by God and known by him from our birth. And, though it might be our wish, in fact we might not be able to "die in harness and finish our course with joy". Gerald Phiri's 51 years was a complete lifespan lived to its fullness; Ron Clark's 84 years likewise. I'm not calling for boasting about our years, but for using our years, redeeming the time and serving Christ while we can.

Let's love Christ and serve his church 'til the end, whether that be 51 years or 84 years, in between, less or more.

Two lives well-lived for Christ. Each man promoted to glory last month: loved by their churches, but loved even more by Christ, head of all things in heaven and on earth. Their passing is precious to God (Psalm 116:15), a blessing to us and a glorious victory for them.

A tale of two lives ... and I think that both Gerald and Ron could say with conviction what was Dicken's final line in his novel: "It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

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