

## **Grace Thompson**

**14 March 1916 - 21 June 2013**

All of us gathered here will have special memories of Grace. To know her was to be touched by her - her gentle, loving presence even in times of physical weakness, her deep faith even when she doubted her own worth. In preparing this eulogy, I have drawn on the memories of a number of people: her RSCJ Sisters, close friends, former pupils, those who cared for her.

Grace was the only daughter of Arthur and Ada Thompson, born in India on 14 March 1916. Her father was an officer in the British army. She had an older, much loved brother, Dick. As a very little girl, he would take her into the garden and water her feet to help her grow so that she could play with him. She became very protective of him when their father seemed to be unduly strict with him. She maintained a close relationship with Dick in adult years in Auckland until his death in 1994.

She began her primary education at the Convent of Jesus and Mary in India. Her parents sent her to continue this in England as a boarder. She began her secondary education at Felixstow Convent before the family moved to New Zealand when she was about 15. Her first contact with the Society began in 1932 when she enrolled at the Sacred Heart Convent, Baradene in Auckland and there completed her secondary years.

After some months at home, she entered the Society at Rose Bay in Sydney, made her first vows there in December 1939 and final profession also at Rose Bay in January 1945. The war prevented her from going to Rome to prepare for final profession.

Grace's Superiors must have recognized that she would have a great talent as a primary educator and she undertook teacher training in Melbourne. She was to teach or be in charge in several junior schools: at Baradene in Auckland, Island Bay in Wellington,

Stuartholme in Brisbane and for a short time at The Rift in Bowral when the primary years from Rose Bay were evacuated during the war.

Grace had a profound and long lasting influence on children she taught or were in her care especially as boarders. A former pupil will never forget her kindness and tenderness at The Rift and wonders if her gift of compassion was born of her own experience of separation from her parents and home. She showed this in simple ways: holding the hand of a homesick child, comforting one who was crying in bed.

Another wrote: Grace taught us Nature Study. Her love of the beauty of nature deepened what my parents had already given me and it has remained with me throughout my life. She taught us English and her love of poetry encouraged me. She had a special interest in English Cathedrals and, inspired by her, we prepared our Feast Books with pictures and a brief outline of the history of the particular Cathedral.

Another remembers: She was so loving and caring of us all. Her discipline was firm, but we all respected her. It was her love for Jesus that has stayed with me, laying the foundations of my own relationship with Him into religious life.

A family of 4 girls was welcomed at Baradene and cared for by Grace. A special bond built up which has been maintained throughout their adult lives. Their mother used to visit Grace's elderly mother when they were very young girls at Baradene and that was how the relationship began. She supported their mother through her cancer journey and the deaths of two of her daughters. Their mother always said: "Grace is your second mother." For this family, she was inspirational with her rock solid belief in her Lord. She remained a force of wisdom and love throughout their lives.

An Australian RSCJ who knew her at Baradene wrote: During her time in the Junior School she seemed to have taught all the boys and girls in Auckland - bishops, priests, parents. In all her teaching roles, she was very loving but also very firm.

Another RSCJ recalls an experience when, as a ten year old, she was making a silent, three day retreat. Wandering in the garden she saw Mother Grace exercising the Convent dog, throwing a stick to be retrieved and laid at her feet. Grace saw her wistful face, threw her the stick, an invitation to join in the game. It was wonderful but short lived. The nun in charge appeared and, not seeing Grace, berated the child for playing with a dog and not praying. She went on her way and Grace gave the child a sympathetic smile.

In the mid 1970s, Grace moved into the role of Superior in community particularly with older religious, a role she accepted at Kerever Park, Baradene, Stuartholme and Karlaminda. As Superior, she was a gentle, caring person who was not shy about showing affection. She was always sweet tempered and bright in the community. She dressed simply, but liked to look nice. She needed reassurance and love and was a great worrier.

In 1977 Grace attended a three month programme in Ignatian spirituality at Canisius in Pymble. This opened her to new personal development and the ministry of spiritual direction. She yearned for the things of God. She loved discussing books to do with the faith and spirituality.

It was often said of her, *Grace in name and grace in nature*. This was evident throughout her life, whether in community, in dealings with parents and alumnae, in her years of being cared for at Karlaminda and St Joseph's. She made deep and lasting friendships, maintained through personal contacts or by written communication. She was an inveterate letter writer and was known one year to have sent and received 94 Christmas cards. Each would have included messages of personal interest and affection. She had just the right words for times of celebration and joy but her great gift was the few words that offered comfort and consolation in others' loss and pain which she carried deeply within her. An

RSCJ she was close to asked her about a year ago: "How would you like people to remember you?" When she suggested, "a person of love", Grace nodded her agreement. "That is how I think of her, a woman of communion."

Perhaps Grace's greatest difficulty was to trust, to trust others, to trust God. She would have times of despondency, doubting God's love for her, doubting that she was worthy to get to heaven. She was a born worrier and it was sometimes difficult for others, even those close to her, to help her move beyond this darkness.

Grace took delight in many things: flowers, especially hand picked from a garden; greeting cards with flowers; photos of gardens; birds; animals including several donkeys at Baradene; growing roses her favourite being one called *Double Delight*. She was a keen apiarist at Baradene at one stage, selling honey from her five hives to support the missions. She was advised in this venture by a neighbor, Sir Edmund Hilary. She enjoyed a sherry in the company of friends and outings with them. She loved to know, would ask the question and elicit the information others wanted to hear.

Grace seemed to draw people who have been her very close friends and who have accompanied her on her journey for a number of years. I must make mention of Father Tony Arthur, our celebrant to-day, who has been her spiritual director for a long time. We thank you, Tony, for the ways we cannot know, ways that you have guided her and helped her to believe in a loving God. Penny, you have been her faithful prayer companion, comforter, mentor, personal secretary, above all her dear friend. You wrote that she was always present to you in a way you have not known before, with her deep listening and wise counsel. She invited you into her life's story and memories as you wrote letters to those faithful correspondents from near and far. May she comfort you now in your loss.

Nancy and Kath, you have been constant in your visits. How she must have looked forward to your arrival nearly every afternoon, Kath. Grace has been at St Joseph's since October 2008. She has received professional, tender, compassionate care from Sisters Pauline and Maureen, from all the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and the staff. The genuine affection shown by the staff and her companions at St Joseph's spoke of who Grace was. We, RSCJ, and her friends want you to know our deep appreciation.

I want to conclude with a poem by George Herbert which she loved, which tells us of her humanness, her self doubts, but also of the heavenly banquet which she now enjoys.

## LOVE

*by: George Herbert (1593-1632)*

**L**OVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'

'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.

Anne McGrath