

ST JOHN'S CATHOLIC CHURCH, CAMPBELLTOWN

SATURDAY 3 JUNE 2006

SERVICE FOR THE LATE JOHN MARSDEN AM

JOHN MARSDEN - LIGHTNING ROD, CHANGE AGENT

Michael Kirby

Despite his enthusiastic preparations for his funeral, John Marsden did not want to die. He clung to this world fiercely. He even went to one of the most difficult places on earth in the hope of talking Death out of its summons. To the very end he was fighting against fate:

"Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light"¹.

I do not intend to speak about external things. His many offices, his public positions, his professional achievements. A lot of people have such achievements. They are not unique. They are passing. In the

¹ Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into that good night".

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face of eternity and in the presence of John's mortal remains, they seem trivial somehow.

Nor will I speak of John's faults and foibles. All of his friends experienced these from time to time. Anyway, that is not what a funeral is about. We all know that we can safely leave it to the anti-"lavender"² brigade amongst the media pundits to do their worst. The moralizers and the self-righteous will have their day. But those who cling to spiritual thoughts know that there was much more to this complex man than met the eye. So I am here, as his friend, to speak of him.

I want to speak of John Marsden as a man. A man who was a change-agent. I pay my respects to him for his example of courage and for the witness he gave to homosexual people and other minorities in Australia. John Marsden's life will not alone change the attitudes of hate and shame. They remain firmly entrenched in many places. The fanatics, the bullies, the zealots and the self-righteous will try to keep it so. We all know these people and how they go on about morality. Many of them pretend to religious virtues. Yet they have forgotten the hard bits, at least of Christian beliefs. The bits about holding back the first stone, forgiving trespassers, judging not lest we be judged and loving one another as He loved us.

² P Sheehan, "Case for damnation of Marsden", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 May 2006, 11.

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In the early days, when he was an openly gay man as President of the Council for Civil Liberties and the Law Society of New South Wales, John Marsden's example made me (and doubtless others) confront directly the false shame. There are still many in Australia who dwell in that dark little corner. Even in Australia today. Up to the 1970s and 1980s, indeed for millennia, most of us lived by the rule: "Don't ask. Don't tell". I did so myself. It was what the vast majority of society expected and wanted and demanded of us. And they backed up that demand with harsh laws.

John Marsden was one of the early leaders who got sick of this. Rightly, he saw that it was irrational. Why should he go on pretending so that other people would not get upset about his reality? Why should this natural feature of his humanity be any longer disguised? He was "out" and actively so. He took his then partner, Philip, to all the official functions. He confronted the leaders of the legal, police and even the religious establishments. He forced political leaders, on both sides of politics, to face up to the reality of homosexuality in the world. In fact, he became quite relentless. As we know, he was not famous for understatement. Gradually attitudes began to change.

Indisputably, this was a big achievement. Especially in those days. Especially for a Catholic man, a loyal son of his Church, who was conflicted by the need to pursue his own "crusade". He did not do it alone; but he was there. Something forced him on. It is called courage. It is easy to be foolhardy if you are indifferent to the opposition. But if

you have been educated, in a seminary no less, by the messages of belittlement, it is quite hard to be courageous. This is when we give out the VCs.

When we think, as we often will, of John Marsden's confrontational style, we must also think of his courage and his example and his leadership. It was all part of the package, you see. It was as if he quietened the childhood religious fears that still worried his inner being - and his anxiety over rejection by the Church that was so precious to him - by making a lot of noise. Like it or not, in societies such as ours it is such people who are the change-agents. They irritate beyond endurance the self-righteous and the moralists in the pulpits and the bully pulpits.

"Life is mainly froth and bubble
Two things stand like stone
Kindness in another's trouble
Courage in your own"³.

On public occasions when we met in the 1980s and early 1990s, John Marsden would assail me with blistering criticism because I was still going along with the false habits of shame. Eventually, I and many others (but not all) followed his lead. Only by truth and rationality will the absurd misconceptions about homosexuals ultimately be laid at rest and the bullies defeated. But as Bishop Tutu has said, everyone must have

³ Adam Lindsay Gordon, "*Ye Wearie Wayfarer*".

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someone to look down on. Gays have often fitted that bill. John Marsden set out to change that. At first, few followed. Attempting to change such things makes many enemies. John Marsden had no difficulty in collecting them.

He paid a price for coming out so publicly and uncompromisingly and early. He became a target. The struggle that ensued was fought for himself; but it was also fought for countless others, young and old, for whom he became the lightning rod. He fought for me and for Johan, my partner of 37 years. So we are here today with countless others to say our thanks.

We must be grateful that, in the end, his trust in law was vindicated in his case. But although he won, he lost. I have seen two friends who were hounded by accusations succumb to fatal cancers. One was Lionel Murphy and the other was John Marsden. Our religion teaches us to forgive; and so I do. But we should still reflect today on the cruelty and unkindness of false accusers. They enjoy a special place amongst the unrighteous.

After such a turbulent life we can all hope that John may rest in peace. So listen to the words of the *Prayerbook* in Thomas Cramner's second *Collect for Peace* where it says, in words apt for John:

"O GOD, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of

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our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*"⁴.

Rest in peace, now beyond the assaults of all enemies, John Marsden - lightning rod; change agent.

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer, Service of Morning Prayer, Second Collect for Peace.*

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