

## **G.11 A Carer's Story #2: Rev. Rod Chiswell**

Frank has asked me to speak briefly on "Where is God in Dementia?" based on my personal experience of the journey of caring for my mother Betty Chiswell who died earlier this year.

My mum was a very godly and intelligent woman. She was an evangelist, a philosopher, a theologian, and a mathematician, as well as being a loving wife, mother, and grandmother. All of which I guess heightened the great loss she, and all of us, felt when she developed Alzheimer's disease about 10 years ago.

Though mum lost a lot with Alzheimer's she didn't lose the most important things: Her love of the Lord, her love for us, and the fruit of the Spirit all remained strong. Mum loved to sing, and was a beautiful singer right up till probably the last three months. A conversation would often trigger a song. Getting up from the wheelchair into the car might spark "Stand Up Stand Up for Jesus". Or sitting in the garden at the Old Bell Tower she would start singing "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

Actually her singing was a great joy and witness to many at Nazareth house as well. One time when my sister Margie was wheeling her up the corridor she was singing "Follow, Follow, I Will Follow Jesus." And when she'd finished she said, "Well that's our witnessing done for the day, I don't suppose they minded do you?" And I don't think they did, in fact I know the staff and residents there loved her singing.

They also loved her sense of humour. Mum said so many funny things. When I grew a beard she didn't like it much, so she said to me "don't they let you shave at St Peter's?"

She was always suspicious of beards. One time we were going into Richardson's arcade in Armidale there was a man with a beard and a backpack standing at the entrance and she said rather too loudly "Is he a terrorist?" I said "No mum" and apologised to the man as we went in. But then when we were just a bit further into the arcade she said rather too loudly again. "Are you sure he's not a terrorist?" "No mum."

Another time we were out for lunch at the Wicklow Pub in Armidale, and there were a group of ladies knitting. I said mum look at those lady knitters. She said "What! Ladies knickers!"

As time went on she even forgot who we were. Which was sad, but strangely funny sometimes. She'd say "You look familiar..." I'd say yes Mum, I'm Rodney James, you're son, and she'd say "that'd be it."

We also had a recurring conversation in the last couple of years:  
How old am I ?  
You're 82  
82! How did I get that old!  
I'd say, you just kept breathing mum.

Though she forgot almost everything else, she always remembered her father's name which she would say often. Samuel James, John Edward, George William, Malcolm, Archibald, Augustus, Alawitious Craig.

But my favourite funny thing Mum said was one morning not that long ago, when she was sitting up in bed having her breakfast. One of the staff was looking at the framed degrees and diplomas on her wall and asked "Betty what's Theology?" She thought for a moment and said, "It's the study of... eating toast in bed."

We had many wonderful times with Mum despite her illness. In fact I'd say some of the richest, most precious moments of my life in the last few years were spent with Mum. Going out for morning tea, singing with her, reading with her, praying with her.

She was always affirming, always thankful, always gracious, Whenever we came to see her she'd say "Hello darling", or "You're a good boy", or sometimes even "you're a good girl" which was a little unsettling when said to me.

When we finished singing a song with her, after the threefold sung Amen, she'd say "goodonya." If we were feeding her she'd say... "thankyou." If we were stroking her hair, she'd say "that's lovely." She was gracious and encouraging right to the end.

Though lots of things were gone, the fruit of the Spirit and her trust in Jesus were obvious right to the end. Her favourite songs which she sang with us till the final week of her life were "The Lord's My Shepherd", "Wide, Wide as the Ocean" and "Jesus loves me this I know". I'm grateful to God that I had the privilege of singing these to her in the final minutes of her life as she let life go and went to be with her Lord.

I'd like to read you a poem I wrote about Mum after sharing a cuppa with her back in 2013. It captures just a little of both the beauty and the sadness of the season during mum's final years. It's called "**Dandelions and Daisies.**"

The sun shone warm, we sat, we talked  
A mother and her youngest one  
"You comfy there? A cup of tea?"  
"No I'll be right, but thankyou son."

We chat a while, then questions flow  
Her mind so sharp, but now confused  
"Do you live here? Does Dad live here?  
And tell me, where do I live now?"  
Then clarity, "He's dying now"  
Eyes fill with tears, the quivering mouth  
"Will it be soon? A week? A month?  
A year? How long? I'd like to know."

"We're not sure Mum, but prob'ly months  
With cancer they don't really know."  
"Lung cancer! Why? He never smoked!"  
"It's sad, but true, we'll never know."

They cry a while, he holds her hand  
And then she spies a dandelion.  
"Could you pick that, and maybe those?"  
She holds them til' they number nine.

"That's lovely, thanks. They're beautiful."  
So fine, yet fragile, held so tight  
"And what about those yellow flowers  
Could you get them too, if it's alright?"

Eight daisies join nine dandelions  
Her smile is one of simple joy  
A wisp of breeze, one flower falls  
and feathery seeds begin to fly

The image froze, the truth came home  
A verse from scripture long before:  
"Though grass will wither, flowers fall,  
God's word remains forevermore.

Rev. Rod Chiswell  
Friday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2018