

Message on the Occasion
of
Michael Cohen's 70th Birthday

When Icarus fell out of the sky, he had only himself to blame for disregarding his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun with the wax-and-feather wings Daedalus had given him.

When Julian fell out of the sky, he had not only himself to blame, but his father's cheerful disposition and stoic determination in confronting his incapacitation. Happily, Julian made a surprisingly good recovery thanks – I suspect – in no small measure to these traits which he has inherited from Michael. Would that Michael could make such a recovery.

Michael has now attained the venerable age of seventy years. When we are told that the allotted lifespan of a man is three score and ten years, we are told nothing of what might be endured over the course of those years. We like to think that they will be happy years, and that there will be more in store thereafter. Today is primarily an opportunity to celebrate Michael's attainment. But it is secondarily – however inevitably – an opportunity to reflect on how Michael has endured so much personal hardship for so many years now. He has done so in a spirit which he shares with Valerie. It is a remarkable feature of their life together and of their family, which I am pleased to count as my family.

My father and my uncle left England with their parents almost sixty years ago. My uncle, Ron Freeman, maintained contact with Valerie and her parents over the years, and it is because of that enduring association that I was introduced into Michael and Valerie's family when I came to live in London. They were keen that I should come up to Manchester on the earliest occasion. On my first visit, they proudly took me to see The Printworks complex which had been redeveloped after the bombing. I cannot pretend that I found it quite as inspiring a symbol of Manchester's endurance as they did. But that was eight years ago. Perhaps I would see it differently now.

For most of the time that I have known Michael, he has been smitten with Parkinson's disease. We all know that this has brought a gradual diminution in his ability to do the things in which he once took pleasure. But over this period, there has also been a tremendous new development that has given him much pleasure. "Children's children are the crowns of old men" we are told in the Book of Proverbs. No doubt, Michael would have consoled himself during this time that it was a source of pleasure to know that he now had grandchildren on the other side of the world. But providence has spared one kindness, and it was no small kindness. Adrian relocated his family from Japan to Manchester. So Michael's pleasure increased further as he could not only know that he had grandsons, but he could get to know those grandsons. An unexpected blessing. And Valerie and Michael have always been good at counting their blessings.

The burden of Michael's hardships in recent years was also lightened by another unexpected blessing when Raymond remarried last year. This provided another occasion for Michael's determination to come to the fore. With Adrian and Julian, he wrote and performed a musical tribute to Raymond. In that performance, we witnessed an expression of fraternal love, and the determination to overcome a disability that might

otherwise have prevented expression of this love. But more than that, we saw an expression of immense dignity. For it was with great dignity that Michael stood next to his sons and sang to his brother. And he stood so tall. Pride in his brother straightened an otherwise crippled back that day. Pride, and Valerie.

Valerie has always supported Michael in his burden without a thought for the burden that this has created for her. She shares his cheerful stoicism. Perhaps it was that that made them see something in The Printworks that I couldn't when we visited it. There was no one in the complex when we arrived. It seemed gloomy to me. There was piped music. Michael got off his scooter, embraced Valerie, and slow-danced her for a minute or two. I have never forgotten that moment. It was a magic moment of impulsive rejoicing in the face of adversity.

To have attained three score and ten years is an achievement. To have attained it in spite of adversity would be reason enough to salute you, Michael. But those who know you, know that in spite of all your trials and tribulations, you are able to find magic moments that give expression to all which makes life worthwhile for you. And so, on your seventieth birthday, we not only salute you, but rejoice in you.

Damien Freeman