

A Tribute to Principal Thanapalan:

Karunyan Arulanantham

I thank the St. John's Old Boys Association of Canada for giving me this opportunity to share a few words at this service of thanksgiving for the life and work of our late Principal Thanapalan.

Trying to find words to express my thoughts and feelings on this occasion, I came across these words of Horatius, in Thomas Macaulay's writing, about a battle in ancient Greece.

*Thus spake brave Horatius,
The captain of the gate
"To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temple of god"*

These words spoken during an ancient battle in a far away land in the 6th century BC could have been spoken in reference to Principal Thanapalan's, life and work. Thanapalan was certainly the "Captain of the gate" of the school. He guarded the gates with courage and wisdom against fearful odds. He did it for "the ashes of his fathers", the school with its long tradition of education and service to God.

He committed himself to St. John's and the community despite personal danger and deprivations that accompanied the brutal war and conflict in Jaffna. He led the school in the best of its traditions and preserved it as an institution we can all be proud of. He led it in a constantly changing and challenging environment; ranging from the days of deprivation in the early nineties, when even writing paper for students was embargoed; through the trauma of shelling and bombing during which people were killed in the school compound itself; through the mass exodus of the whole population including the school; through the displacement of the school to Vadducoddai and finally through the short era of hope, brought about by the ceasefire in 2002.

When I visited the school in 2002, I was truly amazed to find new buildings, good education, discipline, order, fellowship and humanity despite all the brutality and trauma of war. But what did bring tears to my eyes was not the bombed out buildings, including the home where I grew up, or the buildings pockmarked with bullets, but rather the pictures of students studying under the tree in Kilinochchi in the after math of the massive exodus of those living in Jaffna. This was faith in action and hope in the midst of enormous trauma. "Light was shining in darkness" in the true mission of the school. Thanapalan, leading his faithful staff, along with the leaders and staff of Chundikuli, our sister school, were all "guarding the ashes of our fathers".

Mr. Thanapalan was my guardian, host, friend and adviser during my many visits to Jaffna after the cease fire in 2002. It was during this time that I got to know him well. The curfew and the absence of electricity forced us to stay indoors and chat. It was during these conversations with kerosene lamps and candles to provide light, that I realized that Thanapalan had been blessed with the gift of discernment, which enabled him to make wise judgments in difficult and complex situations. He was a generous and gracious host. His wife, Prema, was away in Colombo, yet he provided for me and looked into all the details to ensure that my stay was comfortable and safe. Personally, he was humble and lived a simple life, but in carrying out his duties as the head of St.John's he was courageous, prudent and wise. He was firm in his commitment to the values of decency, order, justice and fair play at a time of turmoil and change. For this, St.John's and those it serves owes him a deep debt. He created an oasis in the midst of a community that was enormously stressed and barely surviving.

It was only during my last visit and interaction with him, before his illness, that I found that he had a deep sense of being guided and called by God to lead St.Johns during those difficult years. He was associated with St. John's almost all his life, as a student, teacher, Middle School Headmaster, Prefect of Games, Vice Principal and then as Principal. He told me that he never worked for or hoped to be the head of St.John's. That task was thrust on him and he accepted it as a calling from God. Sustained by this deep faith and belief, he has left behind a legacy which will be remembered through the ages. We assert that God challenges but also provides the resources to meet the challenges. In raising Thanapalan to lead St. John's, God was with the school in providing for its needs. For this, those of us concerned about St.John's and the education of children in Jaffna will be for ever grateful. He will certainly be numbered among the great Principals who have led St.John's over the last 183 years.

Thanapalan's achievements were facilitated by his faithful companion in life Prema, and their children. Without their love, support and respect, he would have had difficulty functioning during the hard times. We thank them and pray that God will give them comfort and strength in the coming years.

This is an occasion to thank God for Principal Thanapalan's life and work at St.John's and among the people of Jaffna, in the season of war. This is also a time to pray and hope for peace.

Thank you.

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