

Tidenham, Tutshill and Chase 8/10/23

Philippians 3: 4b – 11 – Knowing Christ in Suffering

Prayer

Accept surprises
that upset your plans,
shatter your dreams,
give a completely different turn
to your day
and – who knows? –
to your life.
Leave the Father free
Himself to weave
the pattern of your days.

A poem, prayer written by the Catholic priest, Dom Helder Camara, who worked for decades in South America among the poor.

The pattern of your days – at some stage the pattern of your days **has** included loss. And at some stage the pattern of your days **will include** loss. It's part of being human. When we think of loss, we often think of bereavement – loss through death, but even that can take many forms. There's loss that is hidden – the miscarriage or abortion that may carry an extra burden of guilt. There's the loss of a baby born dead or with just a few precious moments of life. Then there are the losses through life – the break-up of a relationship, the loss that is divorce. And the different loss of redundancy or retirement that brings a loss of role and status. The pattern of our days includes loss. All of these losses impact on us, but every loss is unique and every experience of loss is unique. Never say to anyone going through loss – *I know how you feel* – you don't. And never, ever say, *Everyone feels like that*.

Think of a loss that has hurt you – and if you honestly can't think of anything, then think of someone you know who has experienced a significant loss. Let's root this in real life...

Every experience may be unique but there may still be similar themes and some questions that we can explore. Not that I have the answers, but here we have a couple of questions to explore – *where is God in this loss? And how can I understand this loss in the light of the Gospel?*

In ancient history, the dark ages of 1978 when music was brilliant and fashion terrible I married Nelleke from Holland. We met in Oxford two years earlier and I was one year off ordination. So it was two years later we were in Brecon and Nelleke was pregnant. Her blood pressure shot up and the baby girl died in the womb. So I have a joy ahead of me – when I get to glory, if that is, I can meet a daughter for the first time. It was a real loss, by no means unusual. In some countries parents don't name their children until they are a few months old and have a chance of survival into adulthood. Maybe there are some here who know that loss – or the special pain that comes from being unable to bear children – not the loss of a moment, but the loss of a future.

Twenty years later as a family of four we had enjoyed a good holiday in the south of France and were driving home heading for a ferry at St Malo, when just outside Chartres a car pulled out in front of us

and there was unavoidable collision. The driver of that car and Nelleke were fatally injured. Nelleke died in Chartres hospital without regaining consciousness. My left shoulder and right kneecap were broken. The two lads in the back were uninjured except that Andrew broke his little finger. My life as a single parent began with having to tell two teenage boys that their mother was dead.

I am so grateful for my injuries. They stopped me plunging back into work. I had plenty to do in physiotherapy for many months to get these limbs functioning again.

For weeks after that accident I could not bring myself to open the Bible. I was spiritually numb; it was staring into a black hole. Yet three passages kept coming to mind. John 14 – I wrote it out from memory – *do not let your hearts be troubled...* Alongside that was Dylan Thomas – the poem he wrote on the death of his father – *Do not go gentle into that dark night... rage, rage against the dying of the light*. And Henry Vaughan – 17th c metaphysical poet:

*Death and darkness, get you packing,
Nothing now to man is lacking;
Sin and death, your reign is ended,
And what Adam marred is mended.*

I didn't, couldn't process these – they just circled around in my mind.

We were flown home – to my parents' house in Swansea. The next day my father tried to hide it, but I can read quickly – the *Swansea Evening Post* headline – *Death Crash Vicar comes home*. And when we moved back to the parish where I was based the church didn't really know how to cope when it was their pastor going through the loss. I was meant to be the one who was with them going through their losses.

Praying was hard. I would open the window of my bedroom last thing at night and stare into the sky. The immensity of creation and my own smallness before God. It said something.

What could I read that would be helpful? C S Lewis in *A Grief Observed* got it, but his wife's death was long and drawn out – Joy died of cancer. My loss was sudden, instantaneous, the day after the Omagh bombing. I wrote a book of my own, and I'll sell you a copy for £5. All proceeds go into a fund for taking the family out for a meal. It's not everyone's cup of tea, but I wanted some solid theology. So I turned to Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian – I found his book helpful *The Spirit of Life*. So on New Year's Eve, the brink of '99 – the boys were out at a party – I can't tell you how brilliant their Crusader group was – I was home, wanting to be alone and read theology, and I wrote a prayer –

Lord of the living and the dead,
Lord of all hope and compassion,
at the turn of this year
grant that I may keep company with Nelleke
in retrospective gratitude and forward-looking hope.
Let me neither forget nor be bound by memories.
Transform my mourning and my grief
that I may participate fully in your future,
in your life that is eternal,
through Jesus Christ,
the Resurrection and the Glory. Amen.

I sent Professor Moltmann a copy to thank him for all his book meant to me, and I was delighted to have a handwritten response from him that ended, *in the community of the eternal Spirit of life*.

Every loss impacts on our self-confidence. It certainly did on mine. Social events were a nightmare. The loss gave me a sense of fragility and also gift – the life we do have is a precious gift. I don't know whether it was the loss or just getting older that has left me comfortable with rough edges. I find it unnerving when someone has all the answers – every evangelical answer to every question. It's given me a love for a more probing questioning faith – more poetry than science maybe, rooted in Jesus, his cross and resurrection, absolutely. You can read more in the book if you want...

But we must look at those questions – where is God in all this? Before we set off that morning of the accident we prayed for a safe journey home – that was a custom we learned in Uganda. So did God ignore our prayer? Did we not pray with enough faith? Hopeless questions. It happened. Bad driving happens and there are consequences. I can never find reasons looking backwards, but for me meaning comes in looking forwards. Ephesians 1 – *God will bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ*.

And the second question – *How can I understand this in the light of the Gospel?* Finally we get to Philippians and Paul's ambition in 3: 10-11 – an ambition I want to share and I'm sure many of you do as well – *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering*. I have learnt the hard way that you can't have the first two without the third. If you want to know Jesus you will need to know him through loss in the pattern of your days. Again by his grace I can acknowledge that going through all this was a privilege and a blessing, because I can only know that Christ is faithful through the experience of loss by going through that experience of loss with all the pain and numbness. Sometimes I fear we only want the good stuff and many Christians today want to go easy on sacrifice. We want success and fulfilment – abundant life but not the cross.

And in all of this I can testify too to knowing the power of the resurrection. In 2000 I met and married Anna. I was a basket case with two teenage sons. Mind you, Anna was a bit of a basket case herself having just returned from Afghanistan. We helped each other. For her it was marry one – get two free. Heroic. Am I over the loss? No, never. Wrong question. In the pattern of my days I want *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering*. And that's my prayer for you too.