

Day of Prayer For The Bereaved At St. Cuthman's, June 23, 2010

Remembering Our Loss With Gratitude

Introduction:

As I think I explained in my letter inviting people to come here today, I got a call from *St. Cuthman's* a couple of months ago. They'd noticed a gap in their bookings diary: the upstairs of the house was going to be full today (because the pastoral team from *Dabcec* is staying for a planning session) but the downstairs was going to be empty, because they are working in the day-centre, '*The Garden Room*'. Would we like to use the place for a group? So, being a mug (and because I love this place and thought others would love this place), I said yes. The next question was: whom to invite, given that we could only take 20 people or so? And someone suggested that it would be good to invite the bereaved.

I've certainly been aware of the high number of funerals we've had in the last couple of years – and the longer I've been in the parish there more people I've buried whom I've known personally, many of them people who have been pillars of our community over very many years. And the better you know people, the better able you are to realise the enormous gap that is left by their death in the parish, certainly, but a thousand times more so in the family.

On the other hand, I'm not so foolish as to think that I can really make a difference – that there is anything that I can say that is going 'to make things' better or that there is any single thing that could really be helpful to everyone here. Grief is such a personal thing, loss is incommunicable. My 'gap' is not like your 'gap' when the person dearest to me dies. "*I know how you feel,*" isn't often a very useful thing to say, in my experience, however kindly it is meant – although I do observe an immediacy between the widowed in particular, that allows comfort to be given in a way that no bystander can achieve – the gentle touch of the arm which says more than any words can communicate, the ability to move straight away beyond cramped small-talk. In any case, we sorrow in different ways and at different rates. And not all bereavement is a widowhood. Some of us are here with other losses – of siblings, children, parents, friends. Our stories are themselves very different. So I'm not going to try some amateur bereavement counselling.

What I propose for the day is something much more simple. This is a beautiful space, a hallowed space, a safe space, and you are in good, safe company. Enjoy it. I've been listening on tape to T.S. Eliot reading his *Four Quartets* and there are one or two passages which seem appropriate to today, so I may drop them in at various points. This piece will do for starters, taken from *Little Gidding*:

You are not here to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report. You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

For some of you, talk of prayer will seem natural and obvious. Others (myself included, often enough!) have an initial reaction that we don't know how to pray. Prayer is more than an order of words, or the conscious occupation of the praying mind. Prayer is simply being

ourselves without pretence, being present to our own hearts and being before God, letting ourselves (and our sadnesses) be held, here in this place where prayer has been found over generations to be valid. As Eliot continue, “*Here the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always.*” And *St. Cuthman’s* is certainly very England, very timeless, never and always.

I can offer only some pointers and some images. This morning, I’d like to speak about grieving and remembering. This afternoon, I’ll try to speak on hope, and if I say anything at all useful, blame the Holy Spirit; if I don’t, blame me, look past me and enjoy the view!

On Holy Ground:

The first image which came to mind when I thought about today was the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. Let me read it to you first, and then explain why I thought of this text.

Moses was looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led it to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of THE LORD appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush. Moses looked: there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up. Moses said, ‘I must go across and see this strange sight, and why the bush is not being burnt up.’ When THE LORD saw him going across to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. ‘Moses, Moses!’ he said. ‘Here I am,’ he replied. ‘Come no nearer,’ he said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors,’ he said, ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ At this Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God. THE LORD then said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt ...Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings.’ (Exod 3.1-8)

The place where you are standing, your grief, is holy ground; and I am sure that oftentimes it has felt as though you are being burnt up by it. Yet you are not consumed. You are still here, even if at times you have wondered how, what keeps you going for another day.

So take off your shoes – literally, if you so wish; metaphorically, certainly. That gesture *could* be about removing some layer of protection which we have built up around ourselves – *maybe*, for some, although averting our gaze from it (just as Moses covers his face, afraid to look at God) could be what some need to do at this stage in their story. Far more importantly, taking off our shoes is about recognising the importance of this grief – holy ground indeed. We let ourselves reverently make contact with it. And God is in that grief, although it doesn’t feel like it much of the time. God has seen the misery, God is well aware of the sufferings. That’s what faith dares to say. And the God of the past, “*the God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,*” is also the God of our future. The word, YHWH, which we normally translate as “*I am who I am*” could also apparently be translated, “*I will be who I will be.*”

In A Garden:

That title of God tells us that the story is not over – and I’ll come back to the significance of that in a little while. But before that I’d like to offer you the other image which came to mind

as I was thinking about today. It is significant that this house is blessed with a beautiful garden – and beyond that with a lake and, beyond the lake, normal, agricultural countryside. In the first pages of the Bible, it is a garden which is the place of human habitation, as well as the place of Adam’s first sin. It is a garden, Gethsemane, which is the place of the agony in the Gospels, the place where Jesus faces his own death and then faces his betrayers. But it is a garden, also, which is the place of the encounter with the Risen Lord. In the Fourth Gospel, in particular, he shows himself, unrecognised, to Mary Magdalene. She sets out before the dawn, hopelessly, to honour the man she loved, simply by her presence outside his tomb, trying to be as close as the separation of the grave will allow. The empty tomb is not, at first a comfort. It’s a fresh source of confusion, another violation in a world turned upside down. She meets the gardener, so she thinks, and demands to be told where he has put the body. He receives all her pain, asks the reason for her tears, and then he speaks through the sadness, calling her by name, “Mary!” provoking her recognition, “Rabbuni!” That scene in Jn 20 might be something to meditate on, something to work through in our imagination this morning, letting the Risen Christ call us each by name, hearing the tone of voice, pouring out the sense of loss, feeling the understanding, knowing we are heard by ‘the gardener’, not turned away, however vehement our denunciation of what has been done to the beloved or to ourselves.

Loss – The Testimony of Love:

One of the things that strikes me most at weddings – and I’ve never really explored with a couple their feelings about it, although perhaps I should – is the grandeur of the promises that spouses make to each other:

“I take thee to be my lawful wedded spouse, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

That joyful declaration, made at the moment of commitment, states also the truth which is, I suspect, rightly incomprehensible and unimaginable to the couple in love at the beginning of their relationship, that their partnership in life here on earth must end in separation, one being taken and one being left; the other half, the helpmate, the lifetime’s companion, being torn away, however gentle and peaceful the passing. Of course, the same sadness occurs in a different way with the breakdown of a marriage, but there is something particularly poignant in the declaration of those whose marriages endure. Despite the positive focus on the present sharing of that love, one underlying strand is an assertion about the future: *“I love you enough to face the pain of separation that will one day come.”* And then that pain will become the form of my love, honouring what has been shared, holding onto the goodness that the mourner found in the other and also to the delight that the departed found in his or her beloved. For now, the tears and the emptiness are what love looks like.

Outside the relation of spouses, with the mourning of parents, siblings, close friends or children, or even the other bereavements in our lives – loss of place or status or health, something similar happens: *“I choose to let myself be vulnerable, to be affected by your*

dying, for to love is to embrace this vulnerability.” Only in vulnerability is the gift of self and the reception of the gift of another truly possible. Only then do we understand that we are entrusted to each other for a while; not as property, nor as a ‘given’, utterly dependable, but as fellow pilgrims, to help each other along the way – and yet this accompanying, however temporary, creates an unbreakable bond, a love which is strong as (and stronger than) death.

Remembering:

Honouring the dead isn’t a matter of idealising the past, forgetting the struggles or denying the irritations that life together involves; but it is to recollect the goodness that was involved in that past, those struggles and those irritations. I don’t know whether you are fans of Robin Williams as an actor. For my money he’s too often mannered, mildly irritating (or, in the case of *Good Morning, Vietnam*, extremely irritating). But in *Good Will Hunting* he plays the shrink to whom the young felon, Matt Damon, is sent for one last chance to avoid jail. The criminal, of course, tries to spook the psychiatrist by guessing from photos in his office that his wife is dead and using this fact to undermine his confidence. Then the next time they meet, Williams speaks fondly of the wife he has lost and why he loved her – naming the quirky, odd things, her smile, one of her less appealing personal habits, and so on. And then he tells Damon, how he lay awake at night worrying about what he’d said in their previous meeting, then rolled over and went back to sleep, as he realised that he’s just a dumb kid who can’t understand anything that matters because he’s never loved.

I dare say that remembering can be troubling, even frightening, at some stages of grieving – perhaps most obviously so at the beginning. My aunt apparently stopped going to church when her father died because every time she went she cried – which might have been the reason for going in the first place, to a safe place for mourning. I often include at funerals or in prayer with the family of the deceased some prayer of blessing of the memory: that the things remembered may be kind and merciful, merciful both to the one who has died and to the one now remembering, leading beyond tears and anguish towards laughter and gratitude.

T.S. Eliot speaks, in his poem, *Little Gidding*, of the different ways in which we can use memory, either to enslave and diminish ourselves or to liberate ourselves:

“There are three conditions which often look alike / Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow; / Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment / From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between / them, indifference / Which resembles the others as death resembles life, / Being between two lives – unflowering, between / The live and the dead nettle. This is the use of memory: / For liberation – not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past.”

The use of memory for liberation, an expanding of love beyond desire, freeing us from the future and the past – these are telling images, even if they are hard to grasp (like so much of Eliot’s poetry). I think that what he is saying is something about not holding on frantically to what has been (even when it has been very good); something about not being terrorised by

the past; something about freeing our hearts again for delight, probably (as with Robin Williams) delight in the quirkiness of the one we remember.

For Christians there is, of course one characteristic use of memory, which is that practice which we call the Eucharist. The Greek word for this ‘memorial’ is *anamnesis*. It means ‘calling to mind’; it’s the opposite of some dead monument: we are there as participants, caught up in what we remember. We call to mind the saddest scene of all, Jesus gathered with his disciples, the ones who are about to betray him by running away, together with the one who is about to betray him with a kiss; and we hand that memory over to the Lord, letting him take it and transform it. What he changes it into is the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant, into thanksgiving and praise. Whatever your memories today, let him do the same, taking, blessing, breaking and giving back as our nourishment, giving them back, even, for sharing. We don’t ask him to change our memories but to change the manner of our remembering, taking away any pain and any fear of re-awakening our awareness of the one we miss, the one we carry in our hearts now. Again, I hope that something of that transformation will happen for you with your memories both at the Eucharist and throughout today, changing them from something neuralgic into a source of gratitude.

Grieving:

I’ve not run a day such as this before, so, regardless of whether I end up offering any good sense, I had the good sense to ask advice about what to say and what to do. In particular, I was recommended to talk with a bereavement counsellor called Kathy Quint, who is on the diocesan *Marriage and Family Life Commission*. I don’t think that I can do better than to quote her advice:

“I think that this day will offer tremendous support to those who are still grieving. One of the main concerns raised by clients is how often others, family and friends, have expected them to have moved on while they are still grieving. There is no time limit to grief and we do not leave our loved ones behind. We find a new way to carry them with us for the rest of our life. Grief may ease over time, but the moments of grief are still as painful (which surprises many). I would suggest a few simple ground rules for the day. You may suggest them to the group when you first begin:

- *Be respectful of others – as each will grieve differently and there is no right or wrong;*
- *Confidentiality – the group needs to know that what is said on the day is kept confidential - important for people to trust;*
- *Ask the group not to offer practical suggestions – as so many times my clients are constantly told what to do to get better and do not find this helpful;*
- *Listen – so many others find this difficult and are unable to just “be” with the person at that moment. There is tremendous need to “fix” the problem in our society today;*
- *Talk from the I – I did this and I did not do that (others will take from this conversation what they need) and do not feel burdened by another’s suggestion especially as they will see each other again;*
- *Do not let anyone dominate who thinks they may have the answer;*

- *Be mindful if you have an overly prayerful/religious person – I have had individuals deeply hurt by one individual who made copies of her prayer cards and dispersed them to all present (I was facilitating a group in the parish)– again what works for one may not work for another. Some may be angry with God, others may find peace and comfort in his presence. Those who are struggling with God need reassurance that their feelings and thoughts are ok. They need time to work through this. The overly prayerful person may add to their burden. You may be surprised by some individual’s concept of God and death and you may need to pick up on this with the group.*

“I would not worry about the group being at different stages of grief. They will learn from each other and will be able to relate to how others are doing – “I may be there one day, I have moved on from that particular place, that’s how I feel or how I am coping”. If you find someone who is too distressed and creating any discomfort, you may ask them to consider seeing someone after this particular day. They could visit the GP or make contact with Cruse which offers one to one support or group work. Cruse has a very good website which you may wish to read before the day for additional information. <http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/> There is a good overview of grief, booklets which you could order or print. You may wish to refer the group at the end of the day as the website offers practical help.

“I think what you are planning for the day is ideal. Creating a safe place for people to reflect upon their faith and their loss will be very powerful. There may be many tears but let them be – as so many times others stop the grief as they are uncomfortable with it. Individuals will find their own way through the day. They had the strength to come, they will have the strength and skills to manage the day and to make their way home again (if we did not believe this we would never leave our clients at the end of the session). The gift you offer is yourself – a safe place – and an opportunity for each one to pray and reflect upon their personal loss.”

Mary, Mother of the Grieving:

So that’s probably more wisdom than I’ve managed in the whole last half-hour. But I’ll end by offering you one last image, which is there at the heart of our Catholic Tradition. It is the image of Mary at the foot of the Cross, together with the Beloved Disciple and the other women mentioned in the Gospels. At the beginning of Luke’s Gospel we’re told, after the birth of Jesus, that “Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (2.19) At the end of the Fourth Gospel we get a mirror image of this contemplative heart, standing beneath his broken body, drawn into the pain and given to believers as our Mother, also: “Woman, this is your Son ... [Son] This is your mother.” (Jn 19.25-27). Prayer to Mary, whether through the Rosary or otherwise, might be an appropriate response. She has stood where you have stood.

For Catholics that icon is summed up in the medieval hymn, the *Stabat Mater*. I suggest we finish by listening to that.

At the Cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful Mother weeping,
close to her son to the last.

Through her heart, His sorrow sharing,
all His bitter anguish bearing,
now at length the sword has passed.

O how sad and sore distressed
was that Mother, highly blest,
of the sole-begotten One.

Christ above in torment hangs,
she beneath beholds the pangs
of her dying glorious Son.

Is there one who would not weep,
whelmed in miseries so deep,
Christ's dear Mother to behold?

Can the human heart refrain
from partaking in her pain,
in that Mother's pain untold?

For the sins of His own nation,
She saw Jesus wracked with torment,
All with scourges rent:

She beheld her tender Child,
Saw Him hang in desolation,
Till His spirit forth He sent.

O thou Mother! fount of love!
Touch my spirit from above,
make my heart with thine accord:

Make me feel as thou hast felt;
make my soul to glow and melt
with the love of Christ my Lord.

Holy Mother! pierce me through,
in my heart each wound renew
of my Savior crucified:

Let me share with thee His pain,
who for all my sins was slain,
who for me in torments died.

Let me mingle tears with thee,
mourning Him who mourned for me,
all the days that I may live:

By the Cross with thee to stay,
there with thee to weep and pray,
is all I ask of thee to give.

Virgin of all virgins blest!,
Listen to my fond request:
let me share thy grief divine;

Let me, to my latest breath,
in my body bear the death
of that dying Son of thine.

Wounded with His every wound,
steep my soul till it hath swooned,
in His very Blood away;

Be to me, O Virgin, nigh,
lest in flames I burn and die,
in His awful Judgment Day.

Christ, when Thou shalt call me hence,
by Thy Mother my defense,
by Thy Cross my victory;

When my body dies,
let my soul be granted
the glory of Paradise. Amen.