

Love without pain is a lie

We spend our lives dying. Understand this and we understand much, suggests James Woodward

Befriending death: *Crucifixion* by Nigel Dwyer in St Mary's, Temple Balsall, Birmingham. It was an inspiration for this article

IT MUST be easier for religious people, says a therapist working with the dying and bereaved: "the assurance of eternal life must help you cope with death." I was reminded of a chaplaincy colleague who declined to come to our Good Friday service because it was too upsetting.

Her honesty was shocking, but no less so than those Christians who celebrate the joy of Easter without any attention to the waiting, the pain, and the suffering of Christ's Passion and death. We forget Holy Saturday, the entombment, and the time of absolute loss, which is filled with the activity of getting ready for Easter.

Theology expressed in the liturgy of the Church can shape all parts of our lives. We seek to offer glimpses into how God would have us be in Christ. As we prepare to journey from Maundy Thursday through to Easter Sunday, we should consider how to incorporate the Good Friday experience into our life and faith. Specifically, these days can help people reflect about the nature of loss, change, dying, and death, in the light of faith.

One of my earliest childhood memories centres on the death of my great-grandmother in a mining village in the north-east of England. I was about five years old. When she died, the family kept vigil, and the only job the undertaker had was to leave the coffin at the house.

The family did the rest, and her body lay in the front room, as neighbours and friends came and went. I remember a relative lifting me up to say goodbye, and touching her cold face. I thought how amazingly peaceful she looked.

Modern death is very different, of course. As a result, we are impoverished. We push it away, and distance ourselves from it. There seems little chance of much intimacy in our mourning. The cold space in the modern crematorium allows us to see, but not to touch — somehow distancing us from the realities of dying.

In fact, however, we are dying all the time, and we must ask ourselves how our Easter faith helps us with this reality. As soon as we are born, we begin to die. We all live and grow, but before us lies the reality of the end of our life. We can deny or avoid it, but our lives are an amazing mixture of living and dying — a continual process of movement, change, losses, and gains.

The child in us has to die before we become an independent teenager. Parents have to learn to let go of their children, and take risks by giving them freedom and choice. These dyings and deaths can lead to new life — the pattern of growth into new life by ways of embracing our diminishment and death.

We might consider our lives in the light of those losses. I never get used to parting either from people or from places. The places where I have lived and worked twine themselves around my heart like ivy around a tree trunk. Every corner has a memory that can tug at the heart. Leaving places is difficult, but, unless we

part from one stage, we cannot begin in another. Growth can begin with letting go.

We might consider those parts of our life experience that we hold on to. Our lives can be enriched with broader sympathies and a feeling of hope, if we give space to reflecting on the changes that have shaped our life.

For Christians, the pattern of living and dying, of death and resurrection, is given meaning by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The final meal of Jesus and the Passion make up the central story that enables us to make sense of our lives. We tell and retell the story, attending to the pain, dereliction, and death, so that we can find new life in Christ. In what happened to him, we see hope and meaning and truth for ourselves in our living and dying.

HOWEVER MUCH we might wish to avoid or deny the reality of death, time spent reflecting on the sheer cost of Christ's death offers hope. Images of the crucifixion give us a glimpse of a grotesque death endured in agony. It is a reflection of a God who has come down to the lowest part of our need. This is a complete offering of love and life for us. It becomes for us the new sanctuary of God's promise.

The crucified God is a paradox. He is a God at one with us in total self-giving, a God who knows the absence of God from the inside, and is able to overcome the power of sin and death.

In this earthed sense, the Christian faith is incarnational. It is embedded in a life, not in abstract ideas — a life marked by a love made known to us in those hands pinned by nails to rough wood and then outstretched to embrace the world. Only a God who so engages with us and can bring us salvation is the living hope for which our world longs.

Good Friday offers us the opportunity to engage with the reality of death in us and around us. The promise on the cross is that, in and through loss, through befriending our death, there lies the possibility of a surrender to and intimacy with God. We need, therefore, to learn to become less strong, less confident, less well defended, less identified with our own idea of God.

There is a tyranny that comes from our desire to hold on to certainty at all costs, elimin-

of honesty, humility, and vulnerability.

It is a popular lie that there can be love without pain, or love without sacrifice, or that the word "passion" signifies only the pursuit of pleasure. Such passion is fantasy, and will, in the end, die. True love is love that suffers — and this we find in the love of God which is the Passion of Christ.

CHRIST gave himself to the waiting and the Passion and the death. In his sacrifice, our human world of created values and relationships is challenged. So we can learn that dying strengthens our living. The awareness of limitations and the provisionality of much of life, especially our own mortality, is an expression of living, of healthy-mindedness, as we become more integrated in ourselves.

Perhaps we might consider our own deaths, too, on Holy Saturday — taking time to reflect on what shape our dying might take. We might focus on putting our affairs in order, such as making a will or leaving clear instructions for our funeral.

Our embracing of the reality of these practical matters is a spiritual task. It gives our living a sensitivity, an immediacy, a seriousness, and an innocence. This can open up new dimensions about what we hope for, and who we want to become.

Befriending death finds its goal in making the dying experience explicit. We are not victims of dying, and it does not victimise us. We can, however, be victims of shallow, distorted attitudes to dying.

Dying and death are not separate events — they shape our humanity and our spirituality. Dying is about learning how to give up what we have embodied — sacrificing control, so that we can be less fearful. Being alive is about embracing our humanity, our flesh, our boundedness.

We need to learn to live and die in a way that helps us better understand ourselves and all we stand for. Our engagement in the prayers and silence of our worship — a closer examination of the nature of our death in our believing — can enable our pilgrimage to lead us into new places.

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