

I would like to say “thank you” to those of you who were kind enough to send me a message of condolence following the death of my father. I am deeply grateful.

The loss of a loved one is a very sad occasion which, sadly, visits each of us from time to time. But the support of family and good friends in the church has given me much support.

His death was sudden and unexpected. He had a fall when I was just four days into my holiday. He had been on the floor at home for six hours, unable to get up. There was nothing I could do from the South of France, but managed to get the police and ambulance to gain entry to the house. The Paramedics said he should go to hospital to be examined, they were a little concerned about his blood pressure.

I managed to get a flight from Nimes to Stanstead and travelled to the hospital in Leicester the next day. Though weak, he was in good spirits and after a meeting with the medical team there and with his condition described as “stable” I returned to complete my holiday. By this time, my sister had returned from her holiday and as she lives in Leicester, this seemed the right thing for me to do.

I rang each day and he was undergoing tests but in himself he was OK. Then, upon my return, his condition deteriorated rapidly and on Tuesday of 3rd August with my sister and I and our partners at his side, he died peacefully in his sleep.

He had prostate cancer that became very aggressive throughout his body. Thankfully, he was in no pain and slipped peacefully away.

He died at 7.35am on the Tuesday morning, I said my goodbyes and at 8.00am headed back to Wing Union

Chapel to conduct a funeral for a colleague at prison whose mother in law had died. It was not easy to gather my thoughts and I guess I could have tried to get a colleague to take the service but I felt I had to support this grieving family. I took the service and then drove back to Leicester from Amersham Crematorium to be with my sister again.

His funeral service was a celebration of a good man, a proud D-Day veteran who was a good father. I was blessed with fine parents who set me and my sister on the right paths in life. A chapter in my life has now closed.

A couple of days ago I listened to an interview on Radio 5. It was about a man who had written a book about the brief life of his daughter. She was born with Downs Syndrome and when she was 18 months old it was discovered that she had a hole in the heart and required surgery. She was in Hong Kong at this time, in the care of an internationally renowned surgeon. Two days after the operation her condition deteriorated and she sustained serious brain damage which left her severely handicapped and blind.

She died when she was just eight years old. Incredibly, Shortly after the death of his daughter, his wife died of cancer.

He wrote this book to tell explore his dreadful experience. He also explored a number of issues including on concerning faith. He described himself “without faith” but was intrigued to talk to people with faith to help him to understand how they “squared up” dreadful life events with a belief in a God of love and compassion. He was revisiting the age old question:

“If there is a God and that God is a God of love, why does he allow suffering in the world?”

That would, I guess, cover a whole range of suffering: from the dispossessed millions in Sudan, to the victims of crime, to those who have been struck down with terrible illness and those who have lost loved ones through death.

It is a question that when some people who had faith have had to tackle find that they cannot find an adequate answer that enables them to maintain their faith and they lose it.

Others find their faith deepened and their understanding of life and faith issues confirmed and their faith deepened.

It is the kind of question that has no universal answer. It's like asking "what colour is the ocean?" The answer to that question is not one single answer, like "blue" for if you are on a ship in the Antarctic the answer may be white. If you are on the east coast of Britain the sea is often grey and so on. Each answer is correct from where each person is looking.

Deep questions about God and the issue of suffering requires listening to responses from many sources, from many perspectives, from which a bigger picture may appear and offer a satisfactory answer for each of us.

If we examine the Biblical responses this theme, some interesting perspectives begin to emerge.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-13

“Everything that happens in this world happens at the time God chooses. He sets the time for birth and the time for death”... and everything in between. This very pragmatic world views leads the writer to declare:

“I realised that all we can do is to be happy and do the best we can while we are still alive. All of us should eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for. It is God’s gift.”

I’m happy with that, sounds a pretty solid piece of advice. Jesus confirmed this when he asked which one of us could add a day to our lives? He added

“So do not start worrying : ‘where will my food come from? Or my drink? Or my clothes? Your Father in heaven knows you need these things... instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God...and he will provide you with all these other things.” (Matthew 6:31ff)

Both the Old Testament writer and Jesus talk of a God who knows us, knows our needs and who has mapped out the course of our lives. The Psalmist agrees when he declared:

“The days allotted to be had all been recorded in your book before any of them ever began.” (Psalm 139:16b)

Now this world view, that God is actively involved in our lives and cares passionately about us to the extent that he even is concerned about our day to day needs is fine, but how does that sit with the eight year old whose short little life was racked with suffering?

To the families in the Sudan who see their children wasting away before their eyes?

If God knows and God cares, why allow such suffering?

Back to the Biblical witness where we turn to the book of Job for a glorious exploration of this theme.

Job has it all: health, wealth, family, everything a man or woman could want. And suddenly it was all taken away from him. He lost absolutely everything. It is the ultimate suffering a person could experience: the death of all his loved ones, the loss of all his material possessions and his own loss of physical well being.

His friends come and tell him he must have sinned big time, for God is punishing him for his wickedness. Job protests saying that this view, i.e. that God sends suffering as a kind of punishment for sin is flawed – inadequate and plain wrong.

His friends leave and Job enters into a dialogue with the creator. Job asks all the right questions and God is heard to respond not with answers to those questions, but he responds to Job's faith by overwhelming him with a poetic picture of his divine power and wisdom. This invites a response of trust and faith that accepts that God's will comes from this power and wisdom and in that we can be trust. Job is restored to his former condition, with even greater prosperity than before.

The theme is one of trust. God will not make us immune from the realities of life and sometimes we might struggle to see how bad things can possibly fit into God's plan for our lives. But he who can trust without question will be blest.

Jesus said “Believe in God, believe also in me”

(John 14:1) and he promised that he will be with us always.

What does that mean: “with us” how does that affect the way we see things.

Well for me, over the last few weeks, I’ve had to make some important decisions. Looking back, they were the right decisions at the right time. I made those decision with the help of family and friends and looking back, with the hand of our Lord too. The “footprints” image I warmly respond to as I felt carried by a wave of love, human and divine.

I’ve had my share of suffering and troubles just like everyone of us. I don’t think that I’ve discovered anything new when I have pondered on these experiences but you might find one or two of these helpful.

- 1 If the sun shone everyday you would soon lose an appreciation of it. The reason we Brits talk so much about the weather is because it’s varied; it’s a talking point. When you have to endure rain, mist and fog then when the sun shines its glorious. So bad weather enable us to appreciate the good.

Similarly, if you never had any illness, would you appreciate your health? When you’ve had a bad cold you feel awful, but when you get better you can see how good it is to be well.

I guess what I am trying to say is that, looking back, when things go wrong for us (in relationships, work, family, health) then we suffer. But after that suffering is resolved, healed and you move on, you can learn to appreciate what you have in a new way.

- 2 I hear people say “lets do so and so...it’ll kill a bit of time” – that is so sad because the time we have is finite and should never be wasted. People who

have recovered from serious illness often say that they regard each day as a bonus and when they awake to another new day, they are filled with joy. There is no way they are going to kill that which is so precious. Each day should be cherished and not wasted.

None of us know what tomorrow holds in store. What we should therefore do is live it as if it's your last – live it to the full, tell people we love them, do the things that benefit you and others.

- 3 It seems to me that it matter not so much how long you live, but what you do with the years you are given. We should live and enjoy life and leave the rest in the hands of God.

When John Wesley died, after a long and full life, his dying words were:

“the best is...God is with us.”

His faith sustained him on his journey and he knew in his heart then when he died he would be taken into that house that has many rooms...the Kingdom of God. So I agree with Wesley. Work hard and know that everything is in God's hands and with St Paul know that nothing in life or death can separate us from that Love that is at the heart of creation – our creator God.