

Something I find difficult is being with those who are dying. Partly perhaps because I am reminded of my own mortality. But mainly because I often don't know what to talk about, and fear I am going to say the wrong thing. Uncharacteristically for me, I am often lost for words. When my father was near the end of his life, I was frustrated by not knowing what to say. Now of course I know that it didn't really matter. The most important thing was being there.

It is quite surreal being with someone you know has very little time left. They are still with us, while we are emotionally and spiritually preparing ourselves for the reality that they won't be with us for much longer. On one hand, there can be an exaggerated sense of normality, but on the other hand there is also the unspoken realisation that there is about to be a major upheaval. It is all very unsettling.

One thing my limited experience of spending time with the dying has taught me though, is that the dying person often can be the person who is best handling the situation. While those close to them may be completely distraught, and understandably so, the dying person has often made peace with God and with others, and has accepted what is happening to them.

I recently read a story in which a visitor asked a dying woman how she felt to wake up and know she was dying. Her response was to ask how it felt to wake up and pretend you are not.

It would be a fair assumption that at some stage during Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem, His disciples finally begin to understand and accept that He will not be with them for much longer. We know of three earlier occasions when Jesus spoke of his death prior to their entry into Jerusalem, but it would seem they had failed to grasp what he meant. But now they are in Jerusalem, and they have seen Jesus make some powerful enemies by challenging the religious authorities on their home turf.

Yet we can't really blame them for taking so long to get it. Jesus says things that are difficult to understand. Like how He has to die to be glorified. That He must give up His life so He can receive it back. You can't get much more paradoxical than that.

Jesus gives the example of the grain of wheat. While we know today that a grain of wheat, is not dead but is an embryonic plant in a protective enclosure, people don't know that in Jesus' day. And a seed must be buried in the ground to bear fruit, just like Jesus must be buried in His tomb to rise in glory.

Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, and He reveals the human side of His nature when He admits His heart is troubled by His rapidly impending suffering. However, He declares His obedience to the Father, and in doing so says why He came into the world. The Son of Man must be lifted up to be glorified. Jesus declares His obedience to the Father when He is troubled, and His willingness to do the will of the Father, even though it will mean suffering and dying on the cross, will enable Him to ultimately conquer death and be glorified.

Our faith is based on the Resurrection of Jesus, and the hope that we can share in this. But just as Jesus has to die to live again, death is an inevitability we also must face. No matter how solid our faith may be, it is only human to fear the unknown. We all must pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Some of us sooner, some of us later. And there is no way to avoid this. Or to avoid being reminded of this unpleasant truth as we approach the darkest hours of the Christian year.

But just as a seed must be buried in the ground to bear fruit, we too must leave this life to share in new life that Jesus has opened up for us. So let us confront our own mortality as we walk with Jesus on the last few days leading to the cross. But let us also rejoice that out of His death sprouts the Resurrection, and the promise of life eternal.

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