



There are two prayers that many people here will have prayed. Anyone who's lost someone in an untimely way, particularly perhaps a child, sibling or parent, very close friend.... One is, 'Make them better. Lord, make them better. Get them out of this. May they recover and be healed.'

The other is when that prayer has passed. A lot of people pray, 'Lord, let me join them. Take me as well.' The fact that we're all sitting here today is because, for many of us, neither of those prayers were answered in the way we hoped.

But time goes by and we begin to rebuild our lives. We never "get over it" — that's such an atrocious expression — but we do begin to rebuild. You live with this gap, as Caroline and I did more than 30 years ago when our eldest daughter died, and you begin to rebuild.

In those days Child Bereavement UK was not around, or if it was we didn't know about it.

Our daughter died five days after a car crash on the way back from France. We were moving back to the UK after several years living in Paris. And so we came back and we came to this church, where we'd been married, and we began to rebuild.

Perhaps as time goes by you come to a Christmas service and you hear that reading about the shepherds and their joy and you think, 'Fine for them... doesn't feel much like that to me.' Some people know what to do and what to say, and others cross the road to avoid talking to you because they're so frightened of saying the wrong thing — and I think after a while you understand that.

Time goes by. And I remember that, and that sense sometimes of 'What's it all about? What's it all for?' We were Christians, and sometimes people turn away from God and sometimes they turn to God, and like the psalmist they say, 'Where were you? Where are you?' It's in the Psalms. Tough words, bitter words, of anger with God. Much better said than suppressed.

And if we're wise, and if we have wise friends who love us — and we did in this place; they loved us and they looked after us, it's wonderful — and if we're wise, eventually we begin to look up a bit. We just find the strength. For some people it's much harder than others. Never, ever tell people what they 'ought' to be or 'ought' to do or how they 'ought' to behave... but somehow, with wise friends we were able to move forward.

We came back eventually to that great puzzle, which there is one child in the whole of human history who died, whose father could have done something and didn't. Who could with a mere exercise of will have changed the world so it didn't happen. His beloved child, whom he sent, whom the angels announced, whom he sent to live this risky life, and who died unjustly some 30 years later, out of time, unfairly.

And when we turn to that child and see in that child that there is hope and healing, we find a source of purpose, a source of going on, that is so boundlessly deep, so extraordinarily puzzling sometimes, but so wonderfully embracing, that in the dark moments and the light moments we are held and comforted and carried, often unawares, and the dark moments continue. Many people here will know how suddenly and surprisingly that can catch up on you. You see a face, you think, you hear a tune, you go to a place... and the memories just trip you.

We continue like so many here to live with all of that. But we found over the years that this puzzle of the God that so loved the world that he gave his only son so that all who believe in him should not have that sense of endless death and destruction, but have the hope of life and the knowledge of a future and the life that is somehow rebuilt around us by the grace and love of God.

We found there the transforming hope and purpose which enabled us to rebuild and through many more trials, through many moments almost as bad, to find ourselves where we are, with the bitterness of the memory, and the joy of the memory. With that gap which we remember every 5th November — on the basis that if you don't attack the birthday, the birthday attacks you. And so we have all the family and we do something silly. Buy a present we can't afford, have some fun — we have a lot of fun actually. But there's always that reality, and yet there's now that hope.

And my prayer for those who are in those darkest of dark moments, which I remember so well, where they are praying that second prayer... and neither prayer is being answered, has been answered, I pray for you and for all of us here, for that hope that heals and strengthens and draws us forward, because that child who was born and risked and died and rose again, and offers life to us and to all we love. Amen.

4 min read

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