

The Church's Wounded Army

What do we do when our lives suddenly take an unexpected and devastating turn? When we learn we have cancer or maybe some other life threatening illness? When we are made redundant or we discover that our marriages are failing, or our husband or wife is having an affair? When the unthinkable happens and our longed for new baby is stillborn or born with profound disabilities, or a dearly loved child dies? When our children opt for a life style which is hard for us to accept? As Christians we hope and believe that we will be able to turn to our church for understanding and support. Sadly, that is not always what we find.

Many of the Bible psalms are full of pain and many of the Bible stories, especially the book of Job, tell of lives that have fallen apart, of God-fearing people who lose their way and become separated from the God they worship.

Although I write as a bereaved parent, my experience is shared by countless others, who, for many reasons, have been hurt by the church. The Anglican Church has recently promoted an initiative entitled, "Back to Church Sunday", and an investigation into why many people leave the church. There is obviously a concern to bring these lost souls back into the fold and yet, when I have approached the Church and other affiliated organisations, offering to give a talk which encompasses these issues, I have met with a wall of indifference. In fact my latest attempt to contact the Oxford Diocese, which embraces the area in which I live, has invoked a response, which was not only negative but felt patronising.

In 2007, I attended a two-weekend course on Pastoral Care and Counselling, run by a large Christian counselling organisation. Talking with one of the lead counsellors about our difficulties with our church, she made the comment that the church cannot handle raw pain. This is obviously not true of all churches and there are, as in every situation, exceptions. On the whole, the church seems to turn to the same solution, a box of plasters.

God says through Jeremiah "*They bind up the wounds of my people as if they were not serious. Peace, peace, they say when there is no peace*". The plasters have various titles but generally come with platitudes, such as "God's will" or, when the situation involves bereavement, the platitude is very likely to be that the lost loved one is now "In a better place" or "Lost in Glory and wonder."

In January 2006, Will, our twenty-two year old son and our only child, died from a mystery illness, following a misdiagnosis of MS. He was planning to enter the Anglican Church as an ordained minister and was in the second stage of his application when he became unwell. Throughout the six weeks our son was in intensive care, we could not have coped without the love and support of our church family. Despite the fact that he was transferred to a hospital some distance away, church members regularly made the journey to give us support. Will's funeral service was amazing, the church was packed and we felt upheld and supported throughout the service. Sadly, after the funeral things, were not the same for the church or for us.

Given the level of support we received during his illness, we had every reason to hope we would receive the same level of support after our son died. When we found this was not the case and we were on our own, it came as a shock. Looking back now, I can see that people did not know what to do, that they did not realise that I desperately needed someone to speak with, that the need to talk about what had happened was overwhelming.

When my husband, Edwin, returned to work, a few weeks after Will's death, I found I could not bear to be alone. But alone I was, for seemingly endless periods of time and I would sit, just staring into space, longing for the doorbell or the phone to ring. I would talk to anyone who was prepared to listen. I would often phone help lines. By day I often called a Child Death help line, and many times phoned Samaritans in the middle of the night.

I also found myself angry and resentful that so few people called or came to see me, not being able to appreciate that perhaps it was because they did not know what to say or how to deal with my grief. I have learned so much from this sad experience. Never again will I say to someone grieving "Let me know if there is anything I can do." or "You know where I am". I know all too well now that is the last thing one is able to do in the early stages of grief.

Expecting the grieving person to ask or call for help, is asking too much. I understand too that fear of rejection works both ways. The bereaved person cannot summon the energy or the courage to call and risk rejection. Conversely some people are afraid that they will be rejected if they take the risk of calling or visiting. They are not sure how they will cope if the person grieving becomes emotional. It is a risk some cannot face.

Our circle of friends is now quite different.

When you are in total shock, especially in those early days, you need, as someone described it, “scaffolding, to hold you up.” Barbara Rosof’ tells of one mother who was told by a friend, “If you’d suffered a physical injury as severe as your emotional wound, you’d be in intensive care. You wouldn’t expect a person in intensive care to be fully herself or available to the rest of the family.”

This observation really struck a cord with me – looking back I can see that I was both physically and mentally disabled at that time.

I have a friend who had just begun to attend our church when Will was in hospital and the church was focussed on praying for Will and supporting us.

When we returned home, I heard about this new parishioner and that she was a bereavement counsellor, who specialised in child bereavement. When I expressed interest in speaking with her, I was told it was not appropriate. She is as baffled as I was by this reply and I can only think that it was because I was a member of the church and seeking her help might be interpreted as taking advantage of this. It was some months later, knowing that this person often asked after me, that I picked up the phone one morning and called her. Her love and support was wonderful but not long after our first meeting, she herself was in hospital, on life support and fighting for her life.

This was a very difficult time for me. Obviously, I was upset and worried for my new friend, but as far as the church was concerned, we were consigned to history. What made it even more difficult were the daily emails, updating the church family on her condition. I found these emails unbearable. Like Will, our son, my friend had a tracheotomy and was on a ventilator. Not only that but it was at the same time of the year – exactly one year on. No one – except the person concerned – ever understood how hard this was for me. We were still in deep grief but to expect support and understanding for ourselves when other things were happening within the church family seemed to be deemed as selfish. There was, quite simply, not enough compassion to go round and, after all, it was getting on for a year since Will died.

My experience is by no means unique. In his book, “God of the Valley”, the Rev Steve Griffiths says, “By the time we have to face our first Christmas alone, our first birthday alone, the first re-run of that series our partner loved so much – the Christian community seems to have moved on. We are left alone and comfortless – and it hurts.”

Fortunately, my friend did recover and I treasure her friendship. But, the hard truth is that God does not always answer prayer, at least not in the way we want him to. True healings are rare. I have to believe that He can heal and when Will was in hospital, we heard stories of unexpected recoveries, often at the eleventh hour. But I am also painfully aware that, despite the fact that hundreds of people were praying for Will's recovery, God did not heal him.

I have struggled with my faith since Will's death. An active member of our church before Will's death, I no longer attend services. I did try in the early days but fell apart when any of the worship songs that were sung at Will's service were sung. I kept seeing his coffin on the altar steps and the two seats where he and I used to sit, so often seemed to be unoccupied. Sadly, I have not received the spiritual support I so longed for. On two occasions, I went on retreat to St Mary's convent in Wantage. The elderly nun, with whom I was consigned to talk, was wonderful. Although she had never married or had children, she had more compassion and understanding than many people I encountered at the time. She told me it was all right for me to fall apart and to be angry with God. I came away from my retreat feeling that I had been given permission to grieve.

The Rev. Steve Griffiths tells of the deaths of his young wife, his sister and a close friend and how he was expected to carry on with his duties as a parish vicar, without additional support. He says that those who are recently bereaved or divorced or traumatised by some major crisis are often the subjects of unspoken judgement. He goes on to say that whatever position we have in the church; we are somehow expected to worship God and play a full part in the life of the church throughout our time of grief. He also observes that, *"for most of us, there is a subconscious expectation too, as if our ability to worship is some kind of barometer of faith or a measure of our ability to cope."* Steve set out to raise awareness and set in place some kind of structure, should anyone in the church ministry be faced with life changing difficulties in the future.

I can identify with this. Ever since Will died, I have felt burdened by a sense of having to put on a brave face. I soon found it did not help to be too honest. It was much simpler to say, "I'm fine thank you" although when I am having a bad day, I tend to deflect the question by instead asking how they are. The hard truth is that others have their own lives to lead, they want you to "feel better", so that they can move on with their lives without

having to worry about you. I almost dread the question “How are you?” and both Edwin and I agree that we just don’t know what to say.

I felt I was falling apart, losing my mind. Our lifeline was, and still is, an organisation called “The Compassionate Friends”, which is a charity run by and for bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings and has been a true lifeline for thousands of bereaved parents and their families. Through Compassionate Friends (TCF) we have made some enduring friendships and drawn comfort and inspiration from many of the parents we have met.

One of the most valuable aspects of belonging to TCF is that there is an understanding between its members that one cannot find anywhere else. We speak the same language. This particularly applies to the time of grief; Edwin and I, in our third year without Will, are still in what TCF call “the early days”, whereas most people would consider we should be “coming to terms” with it now

TCF have also helped people to recognise how differently bereaved couples deal with their grief. Edwin, with his work to consider, found that he needed to compartmentalise his grief, something I was unable to do. He referred to his workplace as a “Will free zone.” I was unable to listen to music or play any of the worship tapes Will liked or those we had shared together. Edwin, on the other hand, kept Will’s CD’s and tapes in his car and, as I suspected, wept and grieved as he played them.

We learned from TCF how easy it is for the parents to misunderstand each other. Because of the father’s ability to compartmentalise his grief, the mother can think that he does not care. And, because each parent has their own grief to deal with, it is difficult to reach out to one another because you are both hurting too much. Fortunately Edwin has always recognised that my grief for Will is different from his. I feel blessed that he is the first to say that my grief must be different simply because I was Will’s mother. By its very nature, a mother and child bond is very close.

I recognise that I am the kind of person who needs someone around when I feel so low. Isolation only serves to deepen my depression and pain and, at such times, I really do not want to go on living. Sometimes, when I was alone, I would sit on the side of the bed and plead with God to let me die. I also requested this on Edwin’s behalf but he was not appreciative of my prayers in this respect!

C S Lewis refers to the Christian hope and how difficult it is to apply to ourselves. He says, *"If a mother is mourning not for what she has lost but for what her dead child has lost, it is a comfort to believe that the child has not lost the end for which it was created. A comfort to the God-aimed, eternal spirit within her. But not to her motherhood. The specifically maternal happiness must be written off. Never, in any place or time, will she have her son on her knees, or bathe him or tell him a story, or plan for his future, or see her grandchild."* *

So, why is it that the church so often fails those who are in deep pain and struggling with their faith? I have heard it said more than once that the Church of England "shoots its wounded". There seems to be a reluctance to admit that life can be cruel and that being Christian does not exempt us from hardship. We need to recognise that, for those whose lives have not turned out the way they anticipated, for those whose prayers have not been answered, it is not enough to cover their wounds with plasters and platitudes.

If they, like me, come up against what one church leader refers to as "The betrayal barrier" such comments only serve to deepen our pain. This is not about faith. It is about grief: raw, unspeakable, unbearable, agonising grief.

I know of many bereaved parents who have turned to the church for comfort and support but have found it lacking. Is it little wonder that many parents then turn to spiritualists and mediums?

In November, 2008, I gave a talk on this subject to our church. A friend who is also a counsellor read parts of the talk with me and the friend I mentioned earlier introduced the seminar. The talk was well attended and many people came up to me afterwards, to thank me, some of them in tears, saying that they had not understood and how much they had learned. The church received enquiries the following day, asking whether we were planning to repeat the seminar. This has not happened and, despite the apparent success of the evening, my attempts to take the talk further afield have met with the kind of indifference I referred to earlier.

I have not given up hope. I believe that God will open doors for me, as and when the time is right for Him. Steve Griffiths's powerful book inspired me. To quote his words, *"Utilizing pain can be prophetic, if you have been hurt you are called upon to be a prophet."* He says that if your church community has hurt you, it is your duty to go back to that community and address the situation. He does add that for this to work there need to be a readiness for

both sides to work together to bring about change. Therein lies the problem. But with God, nothing is impossible...

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Since writing this article, Edwin and I have left the church we were attending when Will died and began to attend a more traditional church. We have found it comforting returning to our roots – we are both of the generation where the traditional Church of England service was what we grew up with. This has made me reflect that the more evangelical a church becomes, the less able they seem to accept death as part of life. With some charismatic churches, there seems to be a mind-set that we should celebrate the fact our loved ones are now with God – unrealistic in the face of such overwhelming grief. What I especially like in our new church is that every week the service includes a prayer for the departed and, since this church is never locked (unlike our previous church) I can go in to the church at any time to pray or to light candles. I find lighting candles is very comforting and something I treasure being able to do.

It is now over eight years since Will died and my grief is as deep as ever it was but I have learned over the past eight years to deal with the lack of understanding and accept that others' lives do move, as they must. We grow around our grief, build a wall to protect ourselves and eventually stop expecting our child to call us or walk in at the door. But there can never be what is popularly referred to as "closure". We long for others to mention our child's name, to recall memories for us to share with them but this is rare. I imagine people think that if they do mention our child, they might upset us or remind us – how could we or why would we want to forget our children? We are forever aware of our child's absence and there can never be "closure" for us until we are reunited with our child.

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Acknowledgments

God of the Valley, Steve Griffiths.

The Worst Loss, Barbara Rosof

A Grief Observed, CS Lewis

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