

Along the track

Saying Goodbye

I recently read the blurb on the back of a book about three women separated by centuries yet somehow connected. A shared creative spirit and imagination linked their lives, though centuries apart. It was not a story about reincarnation but a reminder that somehow we are still connected to 'those who have gone before,' but understanding that requires a generous and open heart and a mind not burdened by our need to know, to explain, our need to be in control but a mind and heart open to the grace and wonder of God. What happens after death is something we really don't know all that much about, so we speculate. For some death is the end of it all. For others, reincarnation allows us to live on. For others, heaven provides us with hope, an answer.

In the Mass for those who have died you will hear these words – for your faithful people, life is changed not ended. Indeed it has. Life has changed, it has not been extinguished. It is not over, it has changed in some way that we do not yet understand. This loving relationship that we have shared with this person, at all sorts of levels, cannot simply end. How could it? Love is at the core of our lives. It is what makes life worth living. To love and be loved is the point of it all. Love brings out the best in us. How could it simply go away or disappear at death? In the words of Pope Francis: "If we look at the most painful moments of our lives, when we have lost a loved one — our parents, a brother, a sister, a spouse, a child, a friend — we realise that even amid the tragedy of loss, even when torn by separation, the conviction arises in the heart that everything cannot be over, that the good given and received has not been pointless. There is a powerful instinct within us which tells us that our lives do not end with death".

When Jesus said, 'love one another as I have loved you' that is not just about the here and now. Jesus did not stop loving us when he died on the cross in fact, quite the opposite. As he said: In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you so that where I am you can also be with me (Jn 14:3.). St Paul put it very succinctly: love never ends (1 Cor 13 8).

One of the expressions so often used to describe God in the scriptures is the word 'faithful'. Your faithfulness extends to every generation, as enduring as the earth you created (ps 119.90) is but one of many stories, songs and poems in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Those writings contain a rich

and varied history littered with stories of going astray, exile, rejection of God, returning, repenting, then at times stories of rigidity and subservience in the people's response, rules, rules, rules when they returned and at other times over exuberance. And throughout it all, the constant is God's faithfulness, God's willingness to welcome the wanderers back, to restore, forget and forgive. Being faithful is about patience, kindness and understanding. Why do we need to be afraid when we meet the God of faithfulness and compassion?

At a funeral we gather around the person we have loved to take them to their place of rest. We will miss them but we come together as people of faith to celebrate that their life has not ended, it has changed, to hang on to that. We gather to celebrate a life, to give thanks for it, and to give courage and support to those who must wait until we meet again. We gather to recognise that this person has been faithful - faithful in their love and care for their partner and family, faithful to their friends, to their work and those they worked with, faithful to the things that mattered most in life. As faith-filled people we hand them over in trust to our faithful God. This person will live on in our memories, in our hearts in a very real way. But he or she has moved on to a new life, a new way of being. And so must we. Pope Benedict wrote:

The belief that love can reach into the afterlife, that reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death—this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort today (Spe Salvi #48).

Regards

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