

Before Reading

As Alex said last night, this is the last time he and I share as leaders together of the Strathblane and Killearn joint services for Holy Week. I retire at the end of June, and June and I move to Torrance at the end of June. Ever since I first met you after the retiral of Alex Fleming, I have enjoyed and valued the link with Strathblane. I believe it was when I was your interim moderator, and was responsible for services in both churches at the same time, that we developed this pattern. Thank you for fellowship these last 14 years. June and I have enjoyed coming to some of your evening services.

Killearn has been enriched by sharing these Holy Week services. I hope this partnership will continue

Ministers try hard to be fresh, to avoid repetition. I had better admit, I cannot remember what Alex said on Good Friday last year; actually, when I asked him, neither could he! - till he looked it up. I admit, more readily, that I did not remember what *I* said on Thursday last year, let alone on Friday 2 years ago – had it not been for finding my notes.

We turn to Luke's Gospel, and to some characters that I do not remember commenting on before: the women in Luke's account. May they help us to focus more on the life and death of Jesus, and appreciate better the implications for us.

Read Luke 23: 26-49, commenting en route.

It ends with 3 reactions:

47 The *centurion*, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, Surely this was a righteous man. **48** When *all the people who had gathered to witness this sight* saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. **49** But *all those*

who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Sermon starts here

49 But *all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.*; we are a bit like those women, watching from a distance.

Perhaps we, like them, have been moved to tears. And Jesus appears to say: 'Do not cry...' What does he think of tears?

You can imagine that ministers quite often have to try to help people to deal with grief. We get asked to take a service when someone has died, and the family often assume that we visit to talk about the *funeral* .

Actually, at first we want to offer a listening ear and sit alongside those who are grieving. They need to be free to speak about how they *feel*. As a young, enthusiastic minister, I probably rushed in with the comfort of the Gospel, but until someone knows we feel their grief, they do not really hear us.

The trouble with grief is that it must come out. When people *weep*, we recognize it, but the British are less demonstrative than others, and there can be subtle ways in which that form of expression is denied us.

I can remember, as a very small boy, my father ordering me to stop crying. The more he ordered, the more the tears flowed - until I did not dare. He obviously believed in the stiff upper lip. Crying was for babies, not men. He would make me a man.

Grief is less recognizable when it emerges in other ways – anger and indecision being among the most common, guilt and depression being others. Let's come back to that later.

For we need first to recognize that grief is by no means restricted to bereavement. I have been reading a book called *Third Culture Kids*, carefully researched by David C Pollock and Ruth E van Reken. Subtitled: *The Experience of growing up among worlds*, plural. TCK's may be the children of missionaries, like me, or diplomats, or businessmen, or military personnel. The family could be moved from one country to another, and back, with attendant separations for the children from friends, schools, extended families, and culture.

'Children can lose, in a single plane ride, their whole world: every place that's been important, every tree they've climbed, every pet they've had, and virtually every close friend they have made - gone with the closing of the aircraft door. TCK's don't lose one thing at a time; they lose everything, but there is no funeral. In fact there is no time or space to grieve, because tomorrow they'll be in Bangkok to see the sights, then fly to other exciting places before reaching Grandma's house and seeing the relatives who are eagerly awaiting their return. How could they be sad?

They lose status, lifestyle, relationships, possessions. '

At one conference, TCK's were asked to name some of their hidden losses. One replied: 'Our dishes.'

Dishes? - "We'd lived in Venezuela for all my 18 years. I felt so sad as I watched my parents sell our furniture. But when we got back to UK and my mum unpacked, I suddenly realized she

had not even brought our dishes. I said, ‘Mum... how could you do that?’ She replied, ‘they were cracked, and it’s easier to buy new ones over here.’ She didn’t understand those were the dishes we had used whenever my friends came over, for our family meals, for everything. They were not replaceable because they held our family history.”

These issues can be real for *any* family, of course, not just TCKs. Moving house, the separation or divorce of parents, loss of health, or movement, or speech. And retirement, which I will face in three months.

In these kinds of losses, ‘the main issue is not grief, *per se*. No-one died, nothing was physically stolen. There were no markers, no rites of passage, no recognized way to mourn. Yet, each hidden loss relates to the major human needs of belonging, of feeling we are significant to others, of being understood.’ When ministers retire, one minute they have the status of ‘the minister’. The next, they are just ‘the new family at No 8.’

The majority of TCKs are adults before they recognize the issue. Ruth Van Reken, one of the authors, was 39 when she started writing a journal . She ‘had no idea that the day her parents and siblings left her in US and returned to Nigeria for 4 years was the day her family, as she had always known it, died. Never again did all six children live with two parents as a family unit for any extended period of time.’ She experienced the grief of that moment 26 years later, ‘a grief almost as deep as if she had just had a phone call that her family had been killed in a car crash.’ P170

With so many losses, there is a lack of permission to grieve, lack of time to process grief, a lack of any comfort.

In another case, Courtney stayed with her grandparents in the States for high school, while her folks were in Saudi Arabia. She says, 'I didn't feel nearly so much that I was going somewhere, as that I was always being left. I felt abandoned.

Permission to grieve... Did Jesus deny it?

26 As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. i.e. Jesus was already too weak from scourging to carry the cross-bar himself. So they had press-ganged a stranger, from N Africa, who was on his way *into* Jerusalem, so presumably not thus far involved in the situation. Used when reading the passage beforehand.

27 A large number of people followed Jesus, including women who mourned and wailed for him. **28** Jesus turned and said to them,

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. **29** For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' **30** Then 'they will say to the mountains, Fall on us! and to the hills Cover us!' **31** For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” *Explained beforehand when reading the passage: if this is what they do in the guise of justice to an innocent man, what will they do to the guilty when justice is abandoned?*

That is, he told them not to grieve *for him*, but he gave them permission to grieve for themselves. He knew a time was coming when the city would be ransacked, when life would be so chaotic, people would wish they'd never had children.

Tear Fund's prayer letter this week speaks of Congo, and the trauma people faced when rebels came with guns. One woman saw her husband killed, and had to run with her child to escape, despite being heavily pregnant. Should not we today feel grief and horror at the dreadful things that still happen in our world? May we not weep at these? Of course we may.

I said something like

When Jesus gave those women permission to weep, he took seriously the pain we feel in situations of loss.

Not for him the British 'stiff upper lip' that denies feelings.

When we grieve, or recall an incident where we were not allowed to grieve, Jesus first lets us feel the pain.

As we must do, and let it out, or it will emerge in other, unhelpful ways...

But we do not weep alone. So often, when ministers visit, we cannot say, 'I know how you feel' for we have not gone through what they have just gone through.' But, like the AA advert, we can say, 'I know a man who does:' - Jesus.

No matter how deep the pain, Jesus on Good Friday has felt worse. No matter how low we come, Jesus has been lower. His first action is not to skip compassion and jump to encourage us with cheap words like, 'There, there, don't cry, it'll be all right. You'll feel better in the morning. Time heals.'

(So many of our glib phrases deny people the right to feel the pain of loss, or the means to express it.)

No, Jesus stands by us, with his arm around our shoulder, and says, I am here; I am right with you; lean on me. Be yoked to me; I've got the heavy end.

Yes, there comes a time, after compassion, (feeling with) for words of hope. A time to tell people Jesus was raised from death, in triumph. A time to reach a re-ordered stage of life.

We become able to testify: I have had to lose someone (or something) precious to me; but in the company of the risen Christ, I can go forward into a new situation, knowing he will be with me, and can use me in new ways.

I forgot to use this ending, which was in a different place.

46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Ps 31:5 Into your hands... the prayer every Jewish mother taught her young children to say before bedtime. With addition of one word: Father

With the confidence of a child falling securely asleep in his father's arms, Jesus moved from this life to the next, not a journey of loss, but of gain, for himself, and us.