

TRAUMA, GRIEF AND NEW LIFE

One of the greatest privileges that a person can extend to another person is to invite them into their life. This can be through friendship or romance, it can be through counselling or care. Each of us has a story. We can forge a deeper connection with another person through laughter and love, and through pain and tears.

Clergy experience this privilege regularly as part of their work. In good times and in bad, people share their experiences with them. This may be in a structured way resulting from an appointment. It may occur because the clergy shirt is seen as an invitation to conversation on a train, in a queue or in a conference break.

An important area of clergy ministry is accompanying families as someone is dying and after their death. Clergy join in this with health care staff, funeral directors and celebrants, social workers and other carers. Everyone invited into this journey can speak of occasions of witnessing profound love as well as the healing of hurts. They can also recall moments where rifts have gone unhealed or even intensified. The reality of dying and death brings everything into sharp focus.

At the heart of the Christian faith is a story of dying and death in which there is brokenness and hurt as well as love and forgiveness. The Gospel accounts take us to Jesus' death by capital punishment. Secular historians are satisfied that there was a real person named Jesus who was executed in this way.

One of the Gospel stories gives us an account of two of Jesus' close friends who leave Jerusalem following his death (Luke 24). The text doesn't make it specific, but we can reasonably assume that they had been caught up in the tension of Jesus' arrest and fled for their personal safety. The Roman use of force was designed to ensure civil obedience. The account of the execution of three criminals, Jesus being regarded as one of them, would have spread by word of mouth. The two men are moving to a nearby village. We can imagine that they are uncertain about what their life will now be like. Their experience is not an ordinary rather it is a very demanding experience of dying and death. It is a traumatic experience. The body chemicals that shape response will have been surging. Their minds forever marked by what has occurred.

The Gospel account outlines a supernatural or divine encounter which transforms the way these two friends recount their experience. As they tell their story – a stranger helps them recall the narrative of their Jewish faith and its promises. As they sit down for a meal – the same stranger breaks bread in a way in which they vividly recall Jesus' promises. They know that the stranger is Jesus – risen from the dead. They are left in no doubt that death has not defeated Jesus and he has returned to life. These experiences were so powerful that they changed their plans and returned to Jerusalem, the scene of their trauma. Historians are in no doubt that the Jesus movement commenced in Jerusalem and grew quickly, despite oppression. They also affirm that a driving force in that movement was the sustained belief that Jesus had died and come back to life.

When Christian clergy engage with the reality of dying and death they do so from a place of belief that our existence is not bounded by our earthly journey. We affirm that before we are born we are known by God and after our death we are known by God. We affirm that as Jesus died, rose again and is now present eternally in God, so we can have an external existence where we know and are known. Christians understand such life to be a gracious gift from a loving God who desires close relationship with all that he has made.

The images in the tale of the two men, on the road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel, are repeated all the time in Christian communities. Christians spend time recalling the story of their faith by reading and reflecting on the scriptures. They have a ceremonial meal of breaking bread and drinking wine in which they both remember Jesus and affirm that his life continues to live on them. Christians believe that Jesus is Risen from the dead and is present as Christians assemble.

If we are shaped, in some way, by the story of Jesus and affirm, in some way, that God in love seeks relationship with us, then we will be moved to live in specific ways. The faithful person shaped by the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus is one who knows love and then seeks to embody that love in goodness, mercy, justice-bearing and peace-making.

Dr Peter Stuart is the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle which covers the region from the Hawkesbury River to Lake Cathie, from the Coast to Murrurundi.