

'Physician, Heal Thyself'

5. Bereavement

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Everyone who has been bereaved has his or her own particular story: it is possible to recognize common threads and yet each story is unique. For two ministers to write about bereavement – for Gerald to write about the death of his wife and for Graham to write about the cot death of his daughter – and to tell their own stories, is nothing new: but we have been asked to isolate those aspects of bereavement which may be peculiar to, or different for, ministers: in other words, to ask where the shoe pinches.

Gerald Burt writes:

Margaret and I were married in July 1956, the year I left theological college. For the next 36 years we went where I was invited or sent. So far as possible we worked closely together, but Margaret was also a mother and a part-time teacher, and appointments in Connexional Offices of the Methodist Church were not conducive to working together.

For the purposes of my story it is important to recognize that neither of us had ever been seriously ill, so any thought that one or other of us might die was remote and unreal. Retirement was beckoning us forwards to August 1994, though we had not given much thought to that radical change until a pre-retirement course in October 1992. Mercifully, as things worked out, we had not thought much about life after retirement: in fact, the only decisions we had made were that we would live in Truro (where I had been the Superintendent of the Methodist Circuit since 1986) and that whatever house we bought would have room for a study (and that was at her insistence, not mine!).

In February 1993 Margaret was suddenly taken ill with what appeared to be a serious attack of gastro-enteritis. It refused to go away or to respond to treatment: when side effects began to appear she was admitted to the local District Hospital for a series of tests. Gradually it became obvious that something was seriously amiss and, less than two weeks before she died, the consultant told us that she had an aggressive carcinoma for which no remedial treatment was possible. She spent the last week of her life in the local Hospice where she died early on Maundy Thursday 1993.

Strangely enough she seemed to know in advance that that day was a possibility. The carcinoma was affecting her spinal column and moments of lucidity were rare. One

evening she told me that she thought she had about seven days left (and that was about right). I can still remember writing to a friend of mine saying that it would be appropriate for her and helpful to me if she were to die before Easter. He had the insight to respond, understanding what I really meant, and wrote – Easter is always before us, Gerald. How right he was.

During her illness and after her death I discovered what a special place she had in the life and heart of the congregation, who were shocked, bewildered, numbed by the speed of events. Who could minister to them? Certainly not myself, for I was experiencing the same emotions. Although I 'kept going' as long as I could, my last public appearance was at an ecumenical Lenten service on 24 March, when – or so my diary records – I spoke about ministry. This was the time when my immediate colleague came into her own, not only ministering to my family and me, but especially to the congregation.

Whatever our theology of ordination, our people look to us to lead and care: we lead worship and preach, we care for them in the troubles and sorrows of life, especially at funerals, we share their joy at weddings, births and baptisms: we are the givers, they the receivers. I put it baldly, even crudely, but that is how we are perceived – and, if we are honest, that is how we often perceive ourselves. But bereavement, and its inevitable approach, means we can no longer minister, no longer give, no longer support: we have become all too vulnerable, in need of care and support, sympathy and understanding. Who then cares for the minister and, I must add, his family?

To be honest, some people try and fail – and that is as true of some ministers as it is of some lay people. Quite unwittingly they make it clear that they have come to minister: they assume they know what the minister is experiencing – he must be angry with God, but this particular minister never did feel angry: or he must be prayed with and they voice what they assume the minister wants, but this particular minister didn't really know what he wanted as the inevitable end drew near. What was a particular problem to me at that time were those who hoped and prayed for a 'miracle', that somehow Margaret could be restored to full health and vigour, who believed that a 'cure' was one of the chief gifts of the Spirit. For me that dodged the question of death, whom, all too soon, Margaret and I were going to meet in different ways. In so far as Margaret was aware of her illness she died a 'good death' (as our forefathers used to say). It was her acceptance of the inevitable which enabled mine, and I have become more convinced that acceptance is a key word in Christian discipleship.

Other people, including ministers, didn't seek to minister at all. I wonder why. Did they imagine that I didn't need them and could cope on my own? Did they

just feel inadequate and not know what to say? Certainly after Margaret's death, and as I began to resume my duties, I got the impression, true or false, that some people, doubtless concerned and wishing to be supportive, just couldn't bring themselves to ask, how are you coping? Perhaps they were fearful lest they would not know how to respond if I had replied, not very well today.

I knew, deep down, before and after Margaret died, that my people, my colleagues, my friends did care, did pray, did support: the cards and letters which poured through the letter box after her death bore eloquent witness to that: but few people seemed able to minister. Those who did were, and are, precious indeed. They were the people, ministers, lay people, friends who didn't come with their own agenda, offer their own solution, tell me they knew just how I was feeling, preach their version of the gospel: they just came to be themselves. Some asked the direct question – how is it with you today? Some just encouraged me to talk about Margaret. Others were practical – just leave the garden to us until you retire, come to a meal every Friday for that's your hospital duty day: and others just listened or sat in companionable silence.

To change roles, to receive rather than give, can be hard for the minister, perhaps especially if like Margaret and myself illness had never really hit home before.

And then there is re-entry: preaching the first sermon, taking the first funeral, discovering that certain words or phrases bring unexpected tears to the eyes. In fact I found funerals less of a strain than weddings, especially the words *till death us do part*: but funerals made me wonder how deep my previous sympathy or understanding had been. And some assumed that because I was back on duty all must be well: so I got used to wearing my invisible mask which only the privileged knew how to remove.

It so happens that I write this just over four and a half years after Margaret's death: so there is an inevitable moving on. People still talk with me about Margaret and for that I am glad, but I've also come across a certain puzzlement, especially among those older than myself, that a 'mere male' knows how to cook, wash and iron his own clothes, and keep his house reasonably clean! Widowers in our society strike many people as somewhat 'odd' – perhaps because men are expected not to be able to cope on their own (and, by and large, we are not so good at it as women are). I am gradually coming to accept my single status, that I now live alone. What has come as a surprise is to make new friends, people who never knew Margaret and who see me as I now am and accept me as such.

Perhaps I have given the impression that it is a serious disadvantage to experience bereavement as a minister. Certainly, as both Graham and I have discovered, some

people find it difficult to minister to us – and that is where the shoe pinches. But – and I can speak only for myself – there are advantages.

The day Margaret died was, as I have already said, Maundy Thursday. One of our daughters and her husband had moved into the manse to give me support and company: over our evening meal we decided that we would go to the evening communion service in my own church. Of course we were anxious about how we might cope, but we sensed a shared sorrow and much support: indeed, as I said to one of the congregation, who told me I was 'brave' to come, that I simply wanted to come home to the people and the place where I belonged.

When Margaret died retirement was just sixteen months ahead. I found it difficult to make any important decisions – those which had to be made were quite enough to cope with! But I had to decide which house to buy and the rest I left as long as I could. For many professional people opportunities to continue after retirement in one's previous employment can be limited or even non-existent, but a minister, if she or he so chooses, can continue to minister. I still don't know whether those opportunities to carry on as a minister came my way out of a pastoral concern for me to keep me occupied, or because they fitted my 'natural inclinations and temporal interests' (as the Methodist Covenant Service puts it). I was asked to continue as the Free Church Chaplain to the local District Hospital: I became the District Appraisal Officer just as the scheme for Accompanied Self-Appraisal was about to begin, and my co-author strongly suggested that I might be the County Ecumenical Officer. So I've gone on being a minister. That has eased my loneliness, given me demanding responsibilities and enabled a sense of fulfilment.

As for myself, all I want to say is that (so far as I can tell) I have become more sensitive to, more aware of, the way other people suffer and cope – and not just with bereavement – and that is a bonus I did not expect.

Bishop Graham writes:

Like other bishops, I sometimes spend most of a service at which I'm preaching sitting in a special chair, far away at the east end of a parish church, behind the altar rail and kept well distant from the rest of the congregation. You get used to such episcopal isolation.

Recently, in a rural Cornish church, the vicar was giving various notices (at greater length than any other element in the liturgy) and I took the opportunity to read carefully a monument to a previous incumbent on the wall facing me. The clergyman duly commemorated on that stone tablet had died in 1862, and below his name there appeared a list of four children, all of whom had predeceased him. Only a daughter was left at the time of his death, and she died, a young woman, a few years later. His widow, also mentioned on this memorial, lived on a

long time until she died at the beginning of this century.

It was a stark reminder that for Victorian parents the experience of the death of their children was commonplace. I doubt if it made it any the less tragic personally, but it was a shared experience within communities. Bereaved parents didn't feel the death of their children was especially unusual.

Today things are different. In the Western world we don't expect our children to die. In particular we don't expect them to die suddenly and without apparent cause.

When our daughter Victoria died, aged six months, in 1984 I had been working at Church House, Westminster for a year. I was on the staff of the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry which then had responsibility for the selection and training of candidates for ordination in the Church of England. As a family we lived in Welwyn Garden City, where I had previously been a parish priest. We had an older daughter, and my wife had worked as a midwife at the local maternity hospital. I had taken the funerals of a number of children. I suppose we were as knowledgeable as most about the possibility that one of our children might die. But we did not expect it.

I returned home from London by train one Friday evening, and as I walked from the railway station to our house a friend met me to tell me the news. By the time I got home Victoria's body had already been removed to the mortuary. (The rush to remove corpses from the homes of the living is perhaps one of the most telling signs of our contemporary inability to cope with death.) Victoria was a victim of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, another cot death statistic. She had died in her pram as my wife wheeled her home from a friend's house earlier that afternoon. I was already on my journey from London when they tried to contact me.

We went to church on the Sunday morning as usual. Although I frequently took one of the three services each Sunday morning, I wasn't the vicar and so didn't have to face leading worship in the immediate aftermath of Victoria's death. I don't think I could have done so that Sunday, though we very much wanted to be at church, not least because Victoria had been part of that congregation on almost every Sunday of her short life. They were her family too.

Although my wife and I cried a lot, we soon found ourselves comforting other crying people. There were deliveries of food, bouquets of flowers, and plenty of callers. We had to leave the house sometimes in those early days simply to be on our own. The Christian community didn't avoid us, but lived through it with us, and I sometimes wonder how we would have coped otherwise. Our neighbours, mostly non-churchgoers, were equally supportive. We were very fortunate.

Then the letters came. At Selection Conferences for ordination candidates we had just introduced, for the first

time, a written exercise. Candidates were given a scenario in which they had to write two pastoral letters. One of the imaginary situations involved the death of a child, and so I had read scores of make-believe letters in the months beforehand which addressed precisely the situation I now found myself in. And here I was reading the real thing time and time again.

The written exercise was often criticized at Selection Conferences for being unreal. When you found yourself in that situation, some candidates would tell me, you'd know what to say. I wish that was true of all those who wrote to us. Some letters were a treasure, able to be read again and again. Some added to the distress, and I discovered the pain of being told by those who 'knew' just what we were going through.

What surprised me was how often clergy and lay people alike imagined that we must be angry with God. We were not. The idea that God had inflicted this tragedy upon us as a sign of divine displeasure or random cantankerousness simply never dawned on us. We didn't believe in that sort of God. That was not the God whom we worshipped, nor did it reflect the theology that informed my preaching and teaching ministry. When such responses came from those who had listened to many of my sermons, and attended Bible study groups I had led, I couldn't help but wonder how effective I had been. Did people really believe that I thought God was capricious?

I had the same response to those who thought this must be a great test of faith. I have never quite understood why those who follow a religion with a crucified Lord should regard personal tragedies, when they come their way, as grounds for disbelief. But the way in which some clergy and lay people alike conjectured on these things in their pastoral letters took me aback. It made me reassess my own pastoral ministry. I hope I've avoided telling people what they feel and think without first discovering for myself.

Our actual feelings were those of emptiness, exhaustion, regret and, because the reason for Victoria's death was unknown, it was hard for my wife not to feel even more keenly that irrational guilt that afflicts the bereaved. There was a strange helplessness, and even the prospect of the months ahead recovering from this sorrow made me weary to think about it.

I think it was this emotional and spiritual exhaustion that took time to overcome. I preached again for the first time three weeks after Victoria's death, but I didn't use that, or any subsequent sermon for more than a decade, to speak of the experience. What was initially hard was to find the emotional and spiritual energy to minister to others, which is not the same as losing faith or being angry with God or any of the things people assumed may be wrong. What I could do, and did do fairly soon after Victoria died, was to celebrate the Eucharist and minister to others sacramentally. I have always felt in celebrating

the Eucharist I'm on the receiving end of grace and that was palpably so in those few weeks.

The liturgy has also provided a means for cherishing Victoria's remembrance. Perhaps the most thoughtless remark – made twice to me in the immediate aftermath of her death – was, 'You'll be able to have another child'. We did, but Dominic does not displace or replace Victoria. My wife and I don't want to forget her. We cannot. But there is always the risk of getting stuck in an early stage of bereavement. Whenever I'm asked how many children I have, I feel I've diminished Victoria's memory if I fail to mention or acknowledge her, yet when I've done so I recognize how difficult it is for the other person, on learning of this, to respond adequately. That's especially so in a pastoral relationship, because suddenly the ministerial roles are reversed. I've learned to be careful about when and where I mention this bereavement. So, I believe, has my wife.

In Truro Cathedral there is a 'Remember Our Child' book, where parents place the names of their deceased children and the pages are turned each day. There is a special Remember Our Child service annually in the Cathedral, and it's a surprise to discover just how many bereaved parents there are. Some have found this the first opportunity to express thanksgiving for the life of a child who may have died thirty or forty years ago. At the service a candle is lit for each child as their name is read out. The altar becomes a blaze of light. It reverses all the usual dismal talk about a life cut short. One of the privileges of being ordained is to be able to stimulate and develop this sort of ministry. I've discovered there are benefits as well as difficulties in being ordained when handling personal bereavement. And it's important to recognize much that is positive.

Although I experienced no crisis of faith in this bereavement, there were several people who said to me 'Your faith must be such a comfort to you', as if it were some all purpose analgesic. I certainly had no crisis of faith, but this assumption that the clergy, even more than other Christians, wouldn't feel the same desolation as other people at the loss of a child, seemed then to be cruel and even foolish. But it was repeated frequently enough from those within and outside the Christian community for me to recognize this was a common assumption. Clearly, you're meant to be the exemplary Christian who accepts suffering humbly, inoculated against the ravages of life.

Even one's response to this is not without complications. It made me angry to think that others thought my faith was such a warm blanket against the chill winds of life. Even so, I did recognize some sort of obligation, as much laid upon me by myself as anyone else, to fulfil the role of the exemplary Christian. At the time my ministry with and to candidates for ordination meant that I frequently explored the public representative nature of ordained ministry. Ordination is taking on

public responsibility for the church and for the gospel. Even within those traditions most suspicious of ministerial priesthood, those who are ordained are expected to maintain standards of personal behaviour and moral life that bring public credit on the church. In times of personal distress, there's a tension between what I feel and what I think I ought to portray. The difficulty in the wake of Victoria's death was that I wasn't certain what it was that I was meant to portray, so I simply lived through it and got by.

Gerald's reflections upon his bereavement caused me to recall that not a single person asked to pray with me and my wife. Perhaps we were the sort not to encourage people to offer. I was grateful they didn't. I was glad of their prayers for us (and for Victoria as well), but I wanted the freedom to express to God my own thoughts, responses or lack of them, and not to have others express them for me.

Why was it that people didn't offer to pray with me? Was it, I asked myself, that I was difficult to minister to? I suspect I was. We may become so much the minister to others that we put up a sort of glass wall around ourselves forbidding anyone to minister to us. The problem with that rebuke, 'Physician, heal thyself', is that we do exactly that. Perhaps the clergy are very difficult subjects for ministry, much keener to give to others than to receive for ourselves.

Editor's Note

This concludes the present series of articles. I wish to express my most sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed articles or material. Often it has caused them renewed pain. Always it has meant bringing secret and deep emotions before a public audience. They have written as they have because they wish to help other clergy and ministers who are passing through similar experiences. I am sure that very many of our readers will be grateful for their openness and honesty. I hope also that lay readers will have come to appreciate the way in which troubles which come to everyone can press especially heavily upon those who are ordained.

I selected the topics – divorce, serious illness, retirement, violence, and bereavement – because it seemed to me that these were experiences which many ministers and clergy have had to face or may meet in the future. It may be that our readers have had other experiences which might be included in a possible future short series. If so, I shall be pleased to hear from them – either offering to contribute an article or suggesting a topic which they think deserves discussing. I would emphasize, however, that the aim of the present series, as it will be of any subsequent series, was to show how the experience is affected by the fact that the sufferer is an ordained priest or minister, usually in an official position within the church. It must be clear, of course, that this invitation implies no promise of publication.