

Along the track

Grief is a Lonely Journey

When my father died and the family came back from taking him to his final place of rest, the school buses were picking up students at the end of the school day as usual. It was a shock. Nothing had changed! The world had not stopped because our father had died! I think that upset me more than anything else on that day.

Life does go on. But it will not be quite the same. The person who has died meant something special, something unique for you. Grief is such a lonely thing. It is yours alone. Others may grieve for the same person, but they do not grieve exactly like you or for what you grieve. No-one has lost precisely what you have lost. So the paradox is, we are in it together yet at the same time we are very much alone.

When Lazarus was dying, Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus. He didn't come till four days later, after their brother died. *So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him; but Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died"* Jn 11 20-21. It is a line mixed with sadness, regret, anger, love, frustration, disappointment - in other words, the very mixed emotions that make up grief. Jesus is also deeply moved to tears.

It takes time to work through a loss. Grieving is full of ups and downs, highs and lows. It is perhaps tougher at the start and the lows may be deeper and longer. Even years after a loss, some event or memory may still trigger a strong sense of grief. Trying to ignore such feelings can be a bad mistake or just 'getting on with life' and not acknowledging how you are feeling can prolong grief rather than bring about acceptance.

We all grieve in different ways. There is no orthodox, one-size-fits-all approach, no right or wrong way, no standard timetable, but the Lazarus story offers some important pointers. Just like Martha and Mary, we don't want someone to die. Perhaps we can see the reason for it when someone we love is very ill or in pain, but we still don't want them to go. Perhaps their pain and discomfort may make acceptance a little easier but we miss them just the same. When we mourn for a loved one, it is important to talk, to express our feelings as Martha and Mary did, to talk about the one we have lost. Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus to come, to be with them at this difficult time. Seeking the

comfort of others is important. It is not a time to be alone all the time.

'If you'd been here, our brother would not have died' Martha says. It is difficult to understand exactly what she meant by that. Is she saying that Lazarus would have made a full recovery? Did she believe that Jesus' presence would stop death from happening? A short time later, Jesus on the cross cries out in a similar way, *My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?* If we believed that if God is present, a person would not die, we would also have to conclude that when someone dies, God is absent. In the darkest moments of our grief, we may well feel like that.

But God is with us in life and in death, in our happiness and in our grief, in our struggles and in our joys, in our dreams and in our memories, at the beginning and at the end. That may be easy to understand in times of happiness, in the good times but much harder to understand in times of grief. Death as an event is filled with sadness. Grief touches the heart in ways that are hard to describe but, as the Lazarus story and the Crucifixion teach us, death is not the end.

In the Mass for the Dead we are reminded that:

*In him, who rose from the dead,
our hope of resurrection dawned.
The sadness of death gives way
to the bright promise of immortality.*

*Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended.
When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death
we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.*

That sadness of death sometimes takes a long while to 'give way' but death is the gateway to new and much richer life, more than we could ever imagine.

Regards
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