

HELPING THE TERMINALLY ILL

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Toward the end of last year I visited a good friend, who was dying of cancer. He had been suffering from cancer for a number of years, but now he was losing the battle. It was clear that death was only weeks away, and yet my friend did not want to acknowledge what was happening to him. 'I just don't know what's wrong with me', he said. At that point I was faced with a choice: I could either pretend that I too didn't know, or I could pierce the bubble of unreality and say, 'Of course, you know what's wrong with you - you are seriously ill with cancer and your future is now very limited'. I opted for the latter course. As a pastor I felt I just could not go along with the pretence. In this particular case, my friend was a member of my church, and so we could talk about his impending death, knowing that it was not the end, but rather the gateway to new life. We talked about the Christian hope, and in doing so I believe that I was able to encourage him and strengthen him in his faith. We talked too about arrangements for his funeral. As a result, when I next called, my friend was able to give me a list of hymns he had chosen for his eventual service of thanksgiving as also the Scripture reading he desired. I was glad he did, because this made it possible for his funeral some five weeks later to be so much more personal. Indeed, his choice of hymns and of Scripture reading were a witness to the many non-Christians present at the funeral – it was a case of 'he being dead, still speaks'. Sadly, the experience I had with that friend is not the norm – all too often I do not have the opportunity to talk to the terminally ill about the difference that Jesus can make to our dying as well as to our living. Even amongst Christians there can still be a conspiracy of silence. And what is true of Christians is even truer amongst non-Christians. Time and again relatives and friends have told me that their loved one is dying, but does not know: and they, the relatives and friends, don't want them to know. Even the medical staff can join in this deceitful collusion. As a minister I then find myself in dreadful difficulty: I am under instructions not to say anything, and yet by keeping quiet I am perhaps denying the dying person an opportunity to enter God's Kingdom. What can I do? Pray! Yes, I find that relatives of the dying are quite happy for me to pray for their loved one. So, within the context of a prayer, I thank God that he is with us at all stages in life's journey and that there is nothing in life or in death which can ever separate us from his great love for us in Jesus. Hopefully, in that small way I help the dying to prepare to meet their Maker.