

LOSING A LOVED ONE

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Last month, following a major stroke two weeks earlier, my father died aged 83 years. His death has been a learning experience for me. Although as a minister I have been alongside many people when a loved one has died, I myself had never experienced the loss of someone who was really close to me. I thought it might be helpful to list some of the things I have been learning.

- ❑ ***Death is a shock to the system.*** Time and again I have said in my funeral sermons, “*Death is always a troubling event, however expected it may be*”. When my father died, I found out how true that statement was. Ever since the stroke, we knew that his time was limited. Yet when the news of his death reached me, I was numb with shock. Death for our loved one may be a wonderful release, but for those of us who are left it the experience is always traumatic. Shock is only the beginning of the ‘grief experience’. Feelings of guilt and anger often surface. It is even possible to begin to think that our loved one has not actually died.
- ❑ ***The body is but a shell.*** Immediately on receiving the news of my father’s death I drove down to see my mother. The first thing we did was to go and see my father. He was still lying in the open ward, albeit with curtains drawn around him. Yet it was not my father who was there. It was only his mortal body. The nursing staff had laid him out very nicely. He looked at peace. But it was not him. My father had gone to be with his Lord whom he had loved and served over many years.
- ❑ ***The interval between the death and the funeral can seem an eternity.*** In our case, we had to wait ten days. Ten days by modern British standards is not long. Indeed, over the last Christmas and New Year period many people had to wait much longer than that. But nonetheless those ten days of ‘limbo’ seemed so very long. Somehow it is not until the funeral is over that people can begin to come to terms with the death which has taken place. And even then that takes a while. It is generally reckoned that it can take over a year before one has truly come to terms with the loss of a loved one. For that reason, if at all possible, it is good for the bereaved to delay making any major decision for at least six months, if not a full year.
- ❑ ***The tasks following a death are many.*** First, we had to get a certificate from the hospital, and then to go on to the registrar to get copies of the formal death (Banks, building societies and the like all need to see a copy before they will transfer funds). Afterwards we met the undertaker to discuss our requirements. Fortunately my father had made it clear that he wanted to be cremated. Later the minister came to see us to discuss the arrangements for the church service - in our case we had already chosen the hymns. In addition to seeing the many kind people who called by to express their sympathy, there were phone calls to be made to relatives, letters to be sent to friends. We also wanted to place a death announcement in the newspapers. All these and many other tasks took up the first five days.

- ❑ ***Exhaustion sets in after the tasks have been completed.*** Once these initial tasks were over, I felt totally drained of energy, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I was glad that I was able to take a week's compassionate leave. In the week following the funeral I deliberately paced myself and cancelled some of my non-urgent commitments for that week. As for my mother, who had had the stress of caring for my father over a number of months, she will need quite some time before she regains her old energy again.
- ❑ ***An expensive funeral is unnecessary.*** The hearse apart, we had no funeral cars. We had the cheapest of coffins, and ordered only one floral arrangement on behalf of the family (instead of sending flowers we suggested that friends give money to one of my father's favourite charities). We were not being mean. My mother felt very strongly that there were better ways of honouring my father. I believe she was absolutely right. I discovered, for instance, that although I saw my father's coffin at the crematorium, I did not 'see' it in the sense that it did not occur to me to take a critical look at the coffin - my mind was elsewhere. Indeed, it was not until three days afterwards that I suddenly realised that this had been so. In our case at least, a more expensive coffin would have been an irrelevance. However, as I discovered, even the cheapest of funerals are not cheap.
- ❑ ***People can be unexpectedly kind.*** Even the local bank sent my mother flowers! My mother was inundated by message of sympathy. To my surprise I too received many letters and cards. In receiving them I have discovered what a real silver lining they are at a time of deep sadness. I have been challenged to discover that some of the busiest of people went to a good deal of trouble in sharing their memories of my father. I shall make more effort in this regard in future.
- ❑ ***A loving family is a great support.*** I hope this has been true for my mother. It has certainly been true as far as I am concerned. For me it has been a humbling experience to discover yet again how much wife and children care for me. At a time like this I am so grateful to God for them.
- ❑ Finally, ***Jesus makes all the difference.*** Again, this is something I have often said as a preacher. But I have discovered this also to be very true in my own experience, and not least in these last few weeks. Of course, we were sad. I am not ashamed to say that I shed some tears, as indeed Jesus did when his friend Lazarus died. But, in the words of the Apostle Paul, we did not grieve "*as those who have no hope*"; for "*We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him*" (1 Thessalonians 4.13,14). For this reason we concluded my father's death announcement in **The Times** with another quotation from the Apostle Paul: "*Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*" (1 Corinthians 15.57). Jesus does indeed make all the difference, both to our living and to our dying.

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