



Sharing your faith with the bereaved

By Ian Knox

Billy Graham once said 'as I grow older I seem to go to more funerals' Often those who are bereaved are older. Bereavement is very often life changing. These reactions are typical and normal:

- Shock and disbelief - especially if unexpected
- Anger and darkness - why has God let this happen? This is the dark valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23: 4)
- Depression - a feeling of being down
- Loneliness - this is very hard, because the person is not coming back to relieve the loneliness
- Lostness - what is the point of living now they are going? Where am I going now?
- Guilt - bereavement often brings 'if only'. If only I'd said sorry, if only I'd said goodbye, if only I'd said 'I love you'.

This is a very sensitive time, and helping someone who is bereaved needs to be handled with great care, or faith-sharing will produce a negative response. Here are four areas to watch:

- Beware the danger of avoidance. It is easier to keep away from a bereaved person because we do not know what to say. A friend of mine gave birth to a badly deformed daughter, and so was 'bereaved' of the child she wanted. She told me the most hurtful thing was to see a Christian friend cross over the road to avoid meeting her. Company was what she wanted.
- Do not say too much. A bereaved person is very vulnerable, and does not need a sermon.
- Avoid over-spirituality. Trite 'spiritual' answers will be very counter-productive. Practical help is much to be preferred (what about making a hot meal, or going with the bereaved person when they have to register the death, or helping with the shopping?).
- Most of all, there is the danger of no 'heart' concern. Love, care and even tears are needed. Don't force the latter but don't be too big to cry when the bereaved person does, if you are so moved.

However, here is the chance for you to share the burden and see it handed over to Jesus, who cares (I Peter 5:7).

There is God's help and hope in the midst of bereavement: in the valley of death 'I will fear no evil, for you are with me' (Psalm 23:4).

Jesus is the light both in and at the end of the tunnel: 'I am the light of the world,' he said. 'Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8: 11). According to some research, 13 per cent of all those who become Christians say they did so at a time of bereavement or loss. Bereaved people are not waving their fists at God; some are looking to him for help.

Faith-sharing can, therefore, lead to that lovely word 'salvation', with its meaning of health, wholeness and completeness in Jesus. It was to a bereaved person (Martha) that Jesus said the opening words of the funeral service: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die' (John 11:25). Jesus then immediately asked this just-bereaved woman, 'Do you believe this?' And she did!

When I share my faith with a bereaved person, I am keenly aware of finding the right time and being enormously sensitive. I would have three things in mind, which may be mutually inclusive of each other.

First, I would want to take a bereaved person to what God says in the Bible, perhaps sooner than any other person. We have already touched on Psalm 23, perhaps the ideal scripture here. Martha's experience is followed by the Bible's shortest verse, 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35). Wherever you have found comfort in God's word, use that to show how God has helped you at times of sorrow and crisis.

Next, I would want to take a bereaved person to the cross of Jesus Christ. It was there that God the Father was himself bereaved, and the very sky turned dark at noon (Luke 23:44-45) with heaven's sorrow and grief. Isaiah 53 is the greatest Old Testament passage on the cross and includes those wonderful words of comfort and hope about Jesus. 'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows' (verse 4). God both understands our bereavements and has carried the pain of them.

Finally, I would (with great gentleness) show how it is at this time especially that Jesus makes his invitation for us to respond to him. Look at his remarkable words: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest ... you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29). Don't back away from the bereaved. They are precious people with whom we can share our faith.

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