

A pattern for dying

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Wendy Bray considers the implications of a terminal-cancer diagnosis for her priesthood

A DIAGNOSIS of serious or life-threatening illness is a challenge for anyone. For those of us in ordained ministry, that challenge includes an essential question: “How am I to be a priest — now, and into an uncertain future?”

I was called to priesthood as a person formed as much by experiences of pain and suffering as one discerned to have the appropriate gifts and skills for ministry. Those experiences have made me the priest I am and hope to be, besides equipping me for what I might do.

When I received a terminal cancer diagnosis in 2016, towards the end of my curacy, both the “being” and the “doing” of priesthood seemed destined to be lost.



But there is a distinction to be made, when faced with such news, between loss and diminishment. In terms of my priesthood, certain kinds of loss need to be squared theologically, as well as practically. But loss does not — or should not — mean the diminishment of that priesthood. If I hold to a robust enough doctrine of creation, I will believe that the image of God in me — and particularly in me as a priest — does not disappear with the onset or progression of serious illness.

Most importantly, I am not “being” and “doing” priesthood in isolation, but as part of a community. If priesthood really has an element of “being”, and not just “doing”, then that tells me that I am called to demonstrate the life of Christ in that community, in whatever state of health I find myself.

BUT that priestly ministry must change because of my illness. Within my community, I need to establish pastoral boundaries that make clear who is ministering and who is being ministered to — or risk feeling less of a priest, my own needs (which are real) in danger of eclipsing my ministry (which is also still real).

There is also the oddness of joining my own prayer list and wrestling with the theologies of suffering and sickness voiced by my own congregation, often with the need to challenge them gently — all done while being both the public priest and the private person.

If both my ministry and my illness are experienced in community, my journey towards death is also experienced there, with important pastoral implications.

Sickness, and the inevitable trajectory towards death, are part of the commonality of the human story. The former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Williams talks about the Christian life as being about learning to die. While that formation is no tougher for priests than it is for lay people, it does come with a different calling: the public-facing, community-focused, vocational shape of ministry.

So, as a priest, I must ask questions that inform my theology of dying and help others to form their own. Pastorally, I must be true to Henri Nouwen’s “wounded healer” — recognising when I must be silent about my own experience of suffering, although able to use that experience when I share in

the suffering of others — so that, in doing so, I might express the hope and life of Christ, however indiscernible in the fog of fear or doubt which hope may sometimes be.

TERMINAL illness also generates questions about how my priestly story is part of my human story. Whether I see that illness as hijacking the plotline altogether or simply taking it in new directions will shape my theology of dying.

The trajectory of all human life is to die — and dying, whenever it happens, is not a failure or a mistake, on our part or God's. Yes, for some of us, death comes earlier, more tragically, or more painfully than for others, but *it's still what's supposed to happen in the end*.

If dying is "what's supposed to happen in the end", there must be something in that understanding which will carry me through: the fact that Jesus has gone before. The one who said, "I will go up the road and die", said nevertheless, like me, to his Father, "Please stop this. I don't want it." Yet, Christ lived, wrestled with death, accepted it, and died. It was his calling. His ministry was as vital and vivid in his pain, weakness, humiliation, and death as in anything else.

THE call to live in the way of Christ and his suffering demands something extra of me as a priest: a modelling of what it means to go that same "way", albeit reluctantly. It might seem an arrogant presumption, but, if Christ's pattern is the pattern for my priestly ministry, then dying and death are part of that ministry, too: "The priest is to stand at the crossroads and say 'This is the way Christ called us to walk, let us go there together'" (Cocksworth and Brown, *Being a Priest Today*, Canterbury Press).

Our hope is that there *is* resurrection: there is a defeat of death, and those of us living in priesthood with serious illness are in a unique place from which to hand on that assurance, in faith and humility. Personally engaging with the Christ who faces death, alongside those who do the same, is to bring life-and-death issues into the Christian community with a balance of honest grieving and "sure and certain" hope.

A STAGE 4 (terminal) cancer diagnosis renders me unemployable in stipendary terms: my life expectancy is uncertain beyond a year or so; my physical, emotional, and medical needs will change in line with my prognosis. But I am still a priest.

For now, I can still celebrate the eucharist, pray, listen, preach, encourage — and arrange chairs — in almost exactly the same way as before. Increasingly, I may not always do so with as much energy, or with quite as much concentration, but I will continue to do so with a loving, prayerful, and pastoral heart. There will be loss, but not necessarily diminishment.

I continue to search for a deeper understanding of our mortality, of our hope, and of our human vulnerability — one with another, and before God. There is more theological work, more prayerful reflection, to be done from this place.

Facing a decline in his own health over the last few months of his life, Bishop Michael Perham managed that part of his own story in a way that was both theologically articulate and pastorally wise, as man and priest. After his death, in 2017, the Archbishop of Canterbury posted a message on Twitter: "Bishop Michael Perham's dignity and transparency in facing death revealed the life and hope of Christ, the aim of his whole life and ministry."

My prayer is that, as a terminally ill priest, I may do the same.

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