

the work of grief

When you lose someone you love,
Your life becomes strange,
The ground beneath you becomes fragile,
Your thoughts make your eyes unsure;
And some dead echo drags your voice down
Where words have no confidence
Your heart has grown heavy with loss;
And though this loss has wounded others too,
No one knows what has been taken from you
When the silence of absence deepens.

The first stanza of the late John O'Donohue's poem, *For Grief*.

Tonight is a bittersweet and mysterious occasion in the church's year, when we remember those we love but see no longer; when the depth of the sadness we may feel is also a reflection of how deeply we loved them, and they us. For some, your grief is still raw and the pain of separation still acute, some have made peace with your loss and learned to live with the many unanswerable questions that surround death. Wherever we are on that spectrum, and there is no set timescale or reliable formula for any stage of the process, tonight we come face to face with mystery; with the inexplicable, the unknowable surrounding what Hamlet describes as "the undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns." Inevitably tonight, as we remember those we have loved who have died, we are confronted with our own mortality. We are reminded that death is the great leveller; whatever the circumstances of our births and our lives, one day we too will "shuffle off this mortal coil".

Those we remember tonight were not saints or martyrs but ordinary everyday people, people we have known and loved personally, and who have loved us. They may not have been special in the eyes of the world, but they were special to us – and to God. Some lived long lives, others

suffered what we think of as premature deaths, sudden or protracted; some died in infancy or soon after birth. Each was loved and our presence here is a testament to that love, which lives on in our hearts and is eternal.

We are aided by a number of elements, which are very helpful on a night when words can only go so far. It seems fitting that this service is the first evening Eucharist we've held since the clocks went back, and the darkness and falling temperature outside, the many candles burning on the altar and the incense give a particular atmosphere to our liturgy here tonight. As does Fauré's beautiful requiem, his mass for the dead, and the experience of hearing it in its original liturgical context.

Earlier this week, I was in contact with someone – let's call them Alex - sitting by the bed of a parent whose life was drawing to a close. Alex said, "One of my friends calls this a sacred time. Perhaps it is but it certainly doesn't feel like it." Death is deeply discombobulating. As much as we all hope for a peaceful death, for us and our loved ones, we know often this is not the case. For Alex, this has been a time of deep distress, keeping vigil with a parent knowing there was only one possible outcome, and praying it would come soon.

We sometimes forget that the sacred is not exclusive to positive experiences of beauty and joy or ritual and worship, but also includes experiences of sadness, suffering and pain. Sacred is any time or place or event or situation in which the presence and love of God is felt and seen and experienced (often mediated through others) – and that can be in the saddest and most painful times of our lives. There are few things harder than the heartache and helplessness of watching those we love suffer.

It strikes me that often we fear the death of our loved ones more than we fear our own death. We fear being without the ones we love, being left behind to navigate life without our familiar and closest companions. We may trust that our dearly departed are safe now – with God, in heaven, in the kingdom, in paradise – however we think of it, but sometimes, and especially in the early stages of loss that assurance is insufficient balm for the gaping hole they leave in our lives, or the pain in our hearts or the long slow debilitating ache of grief. We still mourn and miss them.

Death brings home to us the both wonder and fragility of life, which although random, is never futile. The words we've heard in our readings tonight embody both the consolation and the hope we find at the very heart of the Christian faith: that nothing can separate us from the love of God; that through the death and resurrection of Christ, we have the promise of eternal life; that when our life on earth comes to an end, we will be gathered into God's kingdom, where "death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

As for the logistics - what happens when we die - we simply don't know; we know we will be changed, but not how. Faith is about trusting in that which is beyond our sight, and to a large degree, beyond our imagining. It is a mystery, but one we embrace, and one in which we participate tonight. As we remember our departed loved ones, we focus on both the past and the future, in the eternal now of the Eucharist. As we share in this holy feast, we join with them and the whole company of heaven, past, present and future. It is in every sense an act of *re*-remembering; we affirm that we are members of the body of Christ and we witness to the love that binds us.

Tonight, with a whole myriad of emotions, as we acknowledge the sadness of death and parting - the reality of mourning and crying and pain - we take comfort in this sacrament and this beautiful, sacred music, which Fauré himself described as "dominated by beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest".

Tonight we give thanks that our beginnings and endings are inextricably bound in the everlasting love of God in Christ and that as the miracle of our lives on earth come to an end, so an even greater miracle begins.

I close with the final stanza of John O'Donohue's poem:

Gradually, you will learn acquaintance
With the invisible form of your departed;
And when the work of grief is done,
The wound of loss will heal
And you will have learned
To wean your eyes
From that gap in the air
And be able to enter the hearth
In your soul where your loved one
Has awaited your return
All the time.

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