

## From the Vicar



James Russell

Dear Friends

I guess in life there are always different periods or 'seasons' that we go through. Sometimes - hopefully most of the time - good, but sometimes difficult and hard. Well, I think that, as a church and community, we have been going through a particularly difficult season of illness and death. Now clearly, all illness and death is difficult to deal with but when it just keeps coming as it seems to have done throughout 2014, then it is particularly so. For ourselves as a family, we have just been told that my brother-in-law (married to my older sister) has been diagnosed with lung cancer and possibly liver cancer too. The prognosis is not at all good. He is 48, a vicar like me, and father of 5 children. Where will it all stop, Lord, we wonder?!

How, then, do we deal with these things? How, as Christians, do we find strength and hope in God when life seems to be disintegrating around us and loved ones are being taken away? How, also, do we keep keeping on when grief comes so quickly on the heels of earlier tragedies? This question was running through my mind when I took the funeral service for Michael Smith in particular.

I guess, first and foremost, one would have to say that faith would not be faith if it offered easy answers and never confronted us with unanswerable questions. Faith is faith precisely because we are putting our trust in God - someone bigger and more powerful than ourselves. We don't have the mind of God, so we can't understand why, in certain situations, he does things the way he does them. If God was a genie, simply acquiescing to all our wishes, then he would not be God at all!

The dynamic of faith is also seen when Christians, who are hurting and facing great pain, actually find enormous personal comfort and strength in God. He is not simply a cold, callous, comfortless being who they are left shaking their fist at.

This is hugely significant. God is not absent from us in our suffering - he walks through it with us. It is always helpful to remind ourselves that God is certainly not immune from suffering himself. After all, he watched his own dear son suffer and die - for us! The Christian conviction, born out

*How to subscribe to 'connect'...* Just phone **Christian Arnold** on 698357.

through all we read in scripture, is that God is good, compassionate, caring and kind. He is still those things, even if the circumstances we find ourselves in, are painful in the extreme.

So, is life unfair - subtext being: God treats us unfairly? No, he does not. By what criterion could we possibly judge fairness? But life is most assuredly uncertain and, to human thinking, it can certainly feel very cruel at times. This, inevitably then, demands some clear thinking on our part. If life is uncertain, how should we live wisely in the light of that, and how should we encourage our loved ones to live too? Well, Jesus is crystal clear in his exhortation to us. He says, *'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'* John 14:6. This would be the height of arrogance from anybody else's lips but from Jesus, the resurrected Lord, it is a cast-iron promise.

He is simply reminding us that: He is the way - our saviour, guide and friend in this life. He is the truth - he shows us the truth about God, himself and ourselves. He is the life - the one who gives us true meaning and purpose for our lives today, and who assures us of eternal life when our short span of days on this earth is completed. If we trust in him, he will bring us safely into God's presence. His death and resurrection, and all that it achieved for us, is proof of that. So, suffering and death might be a grim thing to go through, but for the person who trusts in Christ, it is simply the means of passage to another better, more permanent world - lived joyfully in the immediate presence of God: the world we have lived in expectation for here on earth.

Each day that we live on this earth, we are to live it for Christ. We trust ourselves to him when we wake; we give ourselves for him as we live our day; and we commit ourselves into his care when we sleep. He is the reason for our existence. He is the one utter certainty in an uncertain world. He will never leave us, or forsake us, and we can never be cast aside from him. He doesn't promise us a life of ease, comfort and good health - if it happens, count your blessings - but he does promise us that *'they will have eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand'* John 10:28. That surely is the spur we need to live a peaceful, selfless, committed life of faith. We give everything for the Lord in the present time and we trust the future to him alone. To try and build on any other foundation, or to make any assumptions about our health or length of days, is utter madness. We simply hold in our hearts the words of that well known Christian chorus from an earlier era *'I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future'*. As Christians, that is all we can ever say and, as Christians, it is about the most profound truth we can ever believe.

If you trusted God yesterday, good. If you are trusting God today, good. If you are still trusting him tomorrow, even better!

With love and care in Christ

James

---

Thank you to Sue Fallon for the cover photograph of the Tower of London's "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red", marking the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War.