



You often hear people say, don't you, that when they have been bereaved or have been caught up in some other terrible crisis, they will see friends and acquaintances cross the street, just to avoid speaking to them. I hear a lot about this kind of thing and I think I know what is going on here. It is not that friends and acquaintances do not care but that they are scared stiff of saying the wrong thing.

People going through a crisis are incredibly vulnerable. And you hear of these people saying afterwards of something a minister said or a doctor said or a friend said, which was entirely the wrong thing and it made them feel even worse. We don't want to do that and anyway, what can you say to a distraught person that can possibly make them feel any better? So we find it safest to keep back and cross the road. Only that is not right either because the person in trouble finds that backing-off deeply hurtful.

When you are a Christian and you are known to be a Christian, you may feel unsure of yourself when people at work or at home discuss difficult issues. People will talk about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and ask whether they are justified, especially if someone they know was flown home in a coffin; they will talk about the financial crisis and whose fault it was; they will question the giving of aid to Third World countries with corrupt leadership; they will ask why earthquakes, why cancer, why Aids; they will struggle with painful relationship issues in their lives; they will ask why religion so often seems to bring out the worst in people. You hear all this but you don't know quite what to say. And you are terrified of saying the wrong thing. Because at the moment the world and the media are full of people who say they were put off God and Christianity altogether by the things that Christian ministers and church goers told them.

So you say nothing. You keep quiet. You might even play down your faith when you are in company. Only that is not right either. Because the world is also full of people who need someone to talk to; who need someone willing to share their pain and confusion; someone who is able to talk about faith without becoming aggressive or tedious. The world needs people who can do theology "on the hoof"- making God relevant to real life in the real world. But can we do that? Can we be sure enough of our own beliefs to feel that we do know what we are talking about? Probably not. So where does that leave us? Absolutely nowhere.

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Going back to people enduring great pain, my great-grandmother once told my mother of the time when a neighbour of hers lost her only child, a boy of thirteen. Great- Gran felt that she must go and see this lady but what, asked my mother, could you possibly have said to her? *I don't think I said anything much*, said Great Gran. *I just held her hand and cried with her.*

There was nothing great-grandmother could have said to lessen the excruciating pain of that poor mother. All she could do was let her know that she was not alone. Someone at least was holding her hand and sharing the tiniest part of her pain. That is all these people who see their friends crossing the street need: they don't expect answers or words of wisdom. They just want to know that they are not alone.

And I think that, at the end of the day this is what the world needs most from the Christian church. People are not stupid. They know that life is complex and that there is a lot we do not know. They do not expect a religion to come up with all the answers. What they need is to know that they are not alone in wondering why, in asking questions, in having doubts, even in feeling angry at the physical, mental,



