



A person dying of cancer, a mother with a handicapped child, an elderly friend losing their physical strength, or even worse, their mental capacity, show us that there are appalling problems which we are not able to solve. This makes us feel so frustrated surely there must be something we can do!

It makes us feel guilty and personally inadequate. Why am I so useless that I cannot do anything about this situation?

I remember, some years ago, a young father in our congregation, who was dying of cancer. I reproached myself bitterly- why could not I have been a cancer specialist rather than a Minister? Then I might have been able to do something useful.

But we had a cancer specialist in the congregation, a brilliant and committed doctor and there was nothing she could do either. It was her daily agony-that despite all her work and all her knowledge, there were still many of her patients she could not save.

Because we are kind, seeing people suffer causes us real pain and the only way we can think of easing our pain is to be able to do something about their situation. And when we cannot, sometimes the easiest option seems simply to avoid the sufferers altogether. Keep away from them, don't get involved, let better people than us take care of them. We say that we are too busy or that we are not the "right kind of person" to offer pastoral care but often, we are just plain scared.

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Naomi was a woman who was suffering more than most. She, her husband and her sons had moved away from their homeland when there was a famine there and had settled happily enough in a foreign country.

For some years all was well but then things started to go wrong. First Naomi's husband died. This was a bitter blow but she did at least have her sons to comfort and care for her and, as they grew up, she saw them married to local girls and hoped that soon there would be grandchildren. Life could have been worse.

But then it did get worse- it got about as bad as it could be. For first one and then the other son died. Neither of their wives had children. There was no hope of any new life coming into the family now.

Naomi's grief must have been almost unbearable but the trouble did not even stop there. In those days, women needed men to support them. They could not work, or own property, or have money. So not only was Naomi facing intolerable loneliness in her old age; she was also facing starvation. Her only option was to return to her homeland and see if any of the men in her family would be willing to give her some food and a corner to sleep in and there was no guarantee of that. As suffering goes, Naomi's was pretty bad. No wonder she started to call herself "Mara" which means "bitterness."

Then her daughter-in-law Ruth decides to go with her. Now Ruth is held up as something of a heroine; an ideal example of what Christian love and care should be.

But, if you think about it, what exactly did Ruth do? What precisely did Ruth say?

She has no wise, profound words to explain to Naomi why she is suffering, no helpful advice to offer on what Naomi should do to "get over it." And Ruth, as a woman, will not be able to get a job and earn money to support them both. The best she can hope for is to be able to pick up a few ears of corn which the reapers leave behind at harvest time. That was about the extent of women's career opportunities in those days.

Ruth can say very little. She can do virtually nothing. All she does is to say to Naomi “I won’t leave you.” It is hardly Nobel Prize stuff but perhaps that was all Naomi needed- to feel that she was not quite alone in a painful and frightening world. Perhaps that was enough- not being quite alone-to light just a tiny spark of hope and energy to get her going again. Certainly, by the time they reached her home town she had stopped crying and started planning.

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In this country today we have bigger and better care services than ever before in our history. They are not perfect- we all know that. They are grossly over-stretched-we know that too. But facilities for health care, for disabilities, for the poor and the homeless and the unwaged are still better than they have ever been before. Naomi would not have been facing starvation and homelessness in our country today.

And yet, if you ask people to list the biggest problems in our society, one which always comes near the top of the list is that of loneliness. We can all eat; we can nearly all claim a roof over our heads; we can be treated when we are ill; but loneliness eats away at human lives today. The feeling that you have no true friends who will stick by you; no-one who will listen to you when you have a problem, no-one who will be there for you when you are in trouble and refuse to kick you when you are down - this is what helps to drive people to drugs and drink, to promiscuous sex-lives and into violent, criminal gangs who at least offer some sense of security. Loneliness helps to push children into eating disorders and self-harm; it pushes men and women into overwork and self-abuse. This feeling that there is no hand to hold, no shoulder to cry on, no ear to listen- that is loneliness and Solomon got it just about right when he said that he would rather eat a dinner of a few herbs with someone who really loved him than a five-course banquet with people who did not care.

It is wonderful to be human and to have a problem-solving mentality. But perhaps the mistake we make is in assuming that problem-solving is only about explanation and action. Human suffering does pose problems to be solved but the starting point is neither explanation nor action. The starting point is simple reassurance-”I’m here for you.” Even Jesus, for all his wise teaching and amazing powers, never wanted to be known simply as the man with all the answers or the man with the miracles. First and foremost he wanted people to know that he cared and that he was there for them. He wanted to win their trust and their friendship. He wanted them to know that they were not alone in a painful world. G. K. Chesterton once said that whilst mathematically speaking, one plus one equals two; when it comes to needing an ally in a difficult situation, one person plus just one other equals two thousand and one.

Pastoral Care can seem like a frightening challenge. Perhaps that is why there are not enough Pastoral Visitors to go around in this church. But I have learned through years of ministry that there is nothing to be frightened of. People do not want wise and learned arguments when they are in trouble; they do not want to be told what to do; they do not even require a lot of practical action. They simply need to feel that they have a friend, someone they can talk to and let out some of the pain inside them; someone who is standing beside them in the darkest places of their lives. You do not need any particular gifts to do this. You just need to be there.

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Finally, it is just worth pointing out that Ruth's story actually went on to have a powerful effect on Israelite history and on Christian theology. She married a distant relation of Naomi's and her great-grandson was King David of Israel. He was a man renowned, not only for his power and wisdom but also for his great kindness. Maybe something of Ruth's influence was passed down to him. Maybe he was told her story and this was what made him unusually tolerant to foreigners and caring people in trouble. Ruth is one of the very few women to appear in Jesus' family tree at the start of Matthew's Gospel- a foreigner and a Gentile, thus reinforcing the proclamation that the Gospel of Christ was for the whole world and not for one race only. Her simple attitude of loyalty and friendship had far-reaching effects which she would never see.

When, in our Gospel reading, people asked Jesus to explain why terrible things happened to innocent people, he firstly assured them that it was not in any way a punishment or "the will of God" that these people lost their lives. But he did go on to point out that the actions and attitudes of individual men and women can have far-reaching effects on their lives and on the life of the world as a whole.

Today we salute the men and women in this congregation who have taken up the role of Pastoral Visitors; people who have set aside fear for the sake of love; people who might feel that they can do comparatively little but whose love and loyalty might well have far reaching effects that they will never see.

*God is love*, wrote St John, *and all who live in love, live in God and God lives in them*. There is a divinity in Pastoral Care- something of God himself. And so all who love in the name of God, we honour you and pray God's blessing.

Amen.