

All Souls Service St Brandon's November 2022

A little pause...time to think. Two things that we may be doing here at present. One is clear – Thanksgiving. Saying thank you = to the loved one, the loved ones, for all they have been. All they have been to us. All that we have shared with them, laughter and tears. Life. The gift of them. Thank you to God, if we believe in him. Thank you for the privilege of sharing life with them. Thanksgiving. The other thing is perhaps more challenging. Managing our perplexity.

There's a writer called Brian MacLaren who has written extensively on 'Doubt' as it relates to the Christian faith. He identifies four stages of faith for the pilgrim:

1. simplicity
2. complexity
3. perplexity
4. harmony

and 'perplexity' for many of us, describes the troubled nature of the questions around suffering, illness and death. Watching a loved one suffer pain, a child dying before their time, a friend dying tragically, are all things which *perplex us* as we hold them in conjunction with faith in the God of love.

Now Brian MacLaren, helpfully I think, suggests that one way to manage perplexity is not to try to find the answer, like solving the answer to a riddle or a puzzle, but to just '*live*' with the questions. Let the question be in you, and be part of you. 'Let it be'...Remember Paul McCartney? 'There will be an answer, let it be'. Don't try and work it out. But let it be in you. Because allowing the questions, the perplexity to be part of us, in time, as we travel with them, seems to lead us into a different place, or as we might say, a different way of seeing. And that's because the journey of perplexity is itself the journey of faith. The terrain which we have to cross may look dark, or hostile even, lonely, arid, empty...but as we traverse it, we discover that something happens to us. Faith is not quenched, it is strengthened.

The other kind of perplexity that strikes at us, is 'Where exactly is my loved one'. I remember finding myself thinking one day, some months after my father had died, 'I wonder how he is?' And we have all sorts of very human ways of trying to answer this kind of perplexity, often based on the character of the person who has gone. 'She be organising St Peter!' Or 'He's Santa's Little Helper, now!' He's one of the stars in the night sky. She's having a party up there...' All rather sweet and understandable...yet also curiously unsatisfying because deep down, when in loss and grief, we experience what the Portuguese call *saudade* which translates as 'The Presence of Absence'. The person has left so much of a gap, we can sense their absence almost as a presence. There but not there. There but – gone....A bit like looking at the negative of an old black and white photo. They evade our grasp. They evade our sight. There – but not there.

I used to do some black and white photography - including developing the photos. You have to immerse the negative in a solution and gradually as you move it about, you begin to see the true picture emerge. The positive, in all its glory. And I'd like to suggest that one way of 'seeing' our loved ones now, is to sort of immerse our picture of them into what we know of Jesus Christ. To see them in relation to him. Not on their own. Not organising a party! Not as a star. But in relation to him. And that's because the Christian faith is clear that he is the future for them, as he is for us. Whatever happens in our future, he is the arbiter of it. He is the door. He is the Way. He is the first-born of the new creation. The old has passed away. The new has come. Sometimes, you know, people say to me, 'People do not rise from the dead!' And I say, 'No they don't! You are absolutely right! That's the whole point!Something NEW, totally unseen before, has happened! Something NEW has happened in the history of the world and the cosmos. He is the first born of the new creation. (Isn't it a lovely thing that, this new thing, this 'big bang' has happened almost silently, quietly among us...unseen yet containing in it all the power of the future) And that's why, whatever our future holds, its Jesus Christ who is at its centre. And that's why the best, indeed dare I say, the only true place to picture our loved ones is in relation to him.