

Along the track

Being There

There are times when we are lost for words. We simply do not know what to say, what to do. Words don't come easily when a relative or friend dies, we often don't know what to say or do for those he or she leaves behind. It is much the same when someone we know is very sick or someone close to them. I read an article some time ago where the author wrote that he did not visit his close friend's hospitalised father because he didn't know what to say or do. After the father died, he turned up at the funeral because 'that's what friends do.' His friend asked him, "Where were you?" He wrote: *"I had violated the first commandment of friendship: presence. Simply being there was all that had been required. The first commandment of friendship is show up!"*

When death comes, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly there is little we can say that will help those who are struggling or mourning but our presence can help heal the hurts caused by having to say the final goodbye and be a support with the anxieties when one season of life ends, and another begins. As the song says, that's what friends are for. For those who are mourning, our presence can help them to share the stories in their hearts, to share the memories that brought laughter and joy, to share times of hardship and growth. That is not the time to say: "I know how you feel." It is time to listen, to hear the other's story, to hear their pain. But sometimes words are not necessary, just being there can express even more, it can be a sign of our gratitude for what this person has given to us by their presence in our lives. At times like these, it is what you do more than what you say. Just listening, being comfortable with silence can be very eloquent.

The Gospel of John includes the story of Lazarus, a long-standing friend of Jesus. His sisters, Martha and Mary sent word that he was dying but Jesus was delayed by crowds wanting his attention. Lazarus was four days in the tomb before Jesus made it. John includes these details. Many had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them during his illness and then in the loss of their brother we are told Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, why weren't you here – the 'where were you?' question again! John tells us that Jesus was deeply moved and that he wept. We know what happened next, but these little details are included because they are important too.

Covid was a cruel time, not just the illness but the isolation. Visiting friends and those who were sick was impossible and few could be part of the funeral ceremony. I have friends who had thirteen children. When their father died, only five of this very extended family could take part in his funeral and weeks later only ten could take part in their mother's funeral. It was a cruel time. While livestreaming funerals offers a chance to be a remote participant in the funeral, hopefully it does not take the place of being there if that is at all possible. It is not another way of enabling us to avoid the difficulty of knowing what not to say or do.

So if the story of Lazarus has any lessons for us now it is this - show up, be present, shake hands, or hold and hug, if that is appropriate. It is OK to be deeply moved, to weep, cry. And listen. But if you can't show up, call, send a note, a card and in the coming weeks, text or ring or just send another note. Grief does not end at the funeral. Reaching out in the days and weeks and months following the event is always important and, if research is any indication, very much appreciated, even the brief and casual check-ins. Sometimes during prolonged times of suffering, people may come to think that God has abandoned them and it is at those times that he or she needs to sense God's presence and love in a person they see, touch, and hear, in other words you. Then they may be able to take heart, knowing that God is near and will never leave them.

And when you're searching for the words to say, "I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what you're feeling right now" can be a good starting point. Please don't say: "I know how you are feeling."

Regards
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