# INSIGHTS INTO QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH

**and**

# MINISTERS AND GRIEF

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**Introduction**

When people asked me what my study leave was to be on, and I answered with one word 'Death', it often brought the conversation to a halt, or my answer was greeted with perplexity. Of course, my answer was somewhat unhelpful. What I was looking at was the traditional Christian understanding of death and how that stood alongside secular understandings. Why was this to be my chosen area of study for eight weeks? A number of people thought it could be depressing, heavy.

The idea came to me when I had taken three funerals within ten days – all of them very different – and I had co-facilitated a workshop on grief and loss. I had also had a number of pastoral conversations with people in the area of loss, and I discovered that there were many different attitudes towards death. Many saw it as all pre-determined, God's will. Others saw death as a natural part of life. Some of those less connected with the church seemed to have a very 'concrete' view of heaven. Others felt that their loved one's spirit was still present in the house (in more than just the memory sense).

The widower of one woman wanted to know how her body would be in heaven? A limb had been amputated – would she have two legs again? Some saw miscarriage as something God had initiated, 'I suppose God knows what he is doing'. Another recounted a story of a young man who had fought unharmed in WW2 for four years, came home and was out painting his house, fell off the ladder and died. 'It was all planned' she said, and found that helpful. There were people who would say 'Oh well, when your number is up, its up'. Fatalism seems to be alive and well.

Different ideas, different questions, different people, different understandings. As a minister, how do I engage with these questions and attitudes, and how do I respond pastorally and liturgically?

So that was one area of interest. But I was also interested to look at how ministers process their own grief when conducting funerals for people they know well in the parish, and at the same time minister to the family and other church members. It can be said that as ministers we are 'professionals' and go into that role at such times. That may be true, but we are also humans with feelings and relationships that have been affected through death. How do we work through all of that, and not merely 'park' it to one side where it has the danger of accumulating and pinching/misshaping us and our ministry? How do we attend to that?

So, I believe this is an interesting and important area to look at. I come to my study leave, very grateful for this gift of time away from the day to day demands of parish ministry. It is good to be able to stand back for a while and to read, think and reflect on these questions.

**Five weeks later**

After five weeks of reading books and talking to people, I am confronted with pages of notes and I realize that Eberhard Jungel is right when he says 'To ask about death is to enquire about life'.[1] For every article or aspect of death that I look at prompts further thought about how we live our lives. What are our beliefs that underpin our living? What is death – what is life? What do the scriptures say and how did people live their lives in the light of that? What is our picture of God? How can people even think about predestination? What are free-will and fatalism about and what do they mean for our lives? What is the function of a funeral service? Questions abound, and I realize, once more, that questions to do with life and death do not have nice, neat answers. However, the questions call us to engage with scripture, with theological writings, with pastoral concerns, and we find some underlying affirmations that, along with a certain amount of mystery, enable us to live among the questions, and the paradox.

Theologians and writers have spent their lives looking at these questions, and it is evident that some of the questions I have are ones that have been pondered over/debated for many years. In eight weeks I am hardly likely to come up with earthshakingly new insights into them all! But as a parish minister I want to take seriously the questions of the people who try to make sense of the happenings in their lives, and grow in their journey of faith.

I present this report in narrative form; sharing my reading and thoughts over the eight weeks of study leave in Dunedin.

## A: INSIGHTS INTO QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH

**So where to begin?**

The first book I read was 'Death, The Riddle and the Mystery' by Eberhard Jungel. I found it to be quite a dense read, mind-bending in places, but discovered some real treasures along the way. I would like to summarise some of my findings, and then set out some areas to look at that flow from his book.

Early in the book Jungel states: 'The question, 'what is death?' is one which is always with us. It is part of the givenness of our lives….Death, in its inevitability affects us in our very innermost being. It compels us to ask Why? What comes afterwards? When? How am I to understand my death?[2]

These questions often come to the fore when we attend funerals, when people close to us die, or when there is some tragedy in the community. We wonder what it is all about, for

[1] Jungel, E. Death: The Riddle and the Mystery, The St Andrews Press, Edinburgh. 1975 p. 95

[2] Ibid, p.8.

we want to try and make sense of the world, and to believe that life is important and of value.

Jungel goes on further 'What is death if man is not merely a body, but who without a body clearly cannot live? And what is man when death means the destruction of his body thereby bringing his physical and spiritual life to a temporal end?[3]

There is a sense that Christian faith as a whole amounts to an answer to the question of death. The church proclaims 'the death of the Lord' in the expectation that the Lord will come (1 Cor 11: 26) 'O death where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting? (1 Cor 15: 35).

Our lives are affected when those close to us die, and we are forced to confront the fact that our life too will end one day. What will come then? It is frequently claimed that Christian faith lives from the hope of the resurrection of the dead. But Jungel is keen to make a point here:

'It is faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God who has been raised from the dead that is the basis which justifies and empowers the hope in the resurrection of all men (whether they themselves share the same hope or not). …This means that Christian faith does not live from the hope of the resurrection of the dead. It is rather that hope in the resurrection lives from faith in Jesus Christ, from faith in the one Jesus of Nazareth who by his resurrection from the dead is made Son of God and Lord. The distinction is therefore not merely to be noted for its subtlety. It is quite decisive.'[4]

Jungel draws our attention to the fact that there is no one agreed view of death in the Bible, a point made by a number of other authors. He also talks of the contrast between Old Testament conceptions of death, and New Testament.

When we look to the Old Testament we discover that to gain an understanding of death, we need to understand their attitude to life. Life here is regarded as the highest good – the Israelites found themselves confronted with death at every step, so the death rate was high, and life was held in high esteem. 'Life is a blessing, death a curse' (Deut 30: 19). And if God, the Living One is the fountain of life, then no-one can have life apart from him.[5]

In the Old Testament world, an early death was regarded as an untimely death, a bad thing. They did not adhere to the Greek idea 'those whom the gods love they leave to die young',[6] the idea of which is heard today in the expression bandied around 'only the good die young', a kind of attempt to come to terms with an untimely death.

[3] Ibid. pp. 25-26.
[4] Ibid. p. 39.
[5] Ibid. p. 62.
[6] Ibid. p. 66

And the dead did not simply 'go down to the pit', they also went to Sheol, the realm of the dead, where they were dead in the sense that they remained transfixed in attitude to the life that was once theirs.[7]

God was seen as having dominion over death, it is God who kills and brings to life (1 Sam 2: 6) and God who returns man to dust (Psalm 90: 3). Yet God is the god of the living, the dead are cut off, and so there is a distance between God and those who have died. This alienation is the real misery of death. A person who dies does not return home to God, rather they return to the dust from which they were created. 'The dead do not praise the Lord' (Psalm 115: 17). In the Old Testament world, life means to have a relationship. In death there is relationlessness (to self, others, God).[8]

It is only on the periphery of the Old Testament that the idea arises that there is hope for the dead. There is some talk of deliverance in the Psalms, but that really refers to help which is called for in special need.[9]

When we come to the New Testament, we see a marked contrast of attitude. Here there is an attitude of certainty of God's victory over death. What death is all about is something which is decided by the death of Jesus Christ. [Phil 1: 20f, John 5: 24, John 11: 25 f] Both life and death are defined by Jesus, and neither can separate people from God. So, the idea of relationlessness has gone.[10]

'If death as a curse is the consequence of man's drive toward relationlessness, then any deliverance from this death must consist in the creation of a new foundation for those relationships in which alone human life can find its fulfilment'.[11]

So we see this foundation is Jesus Christ, and that relationship with God cannot be broken. Yes, human life may come to an end, but the relationship goes on.

It seems there was growing emergence of belief about resurrection in the inter-testamental period.

The New Testament offers differing interpretations of the death of Jesus. Jungel points out that the Bible is not a book which supplies unproblematic answers. It is a book which speaks to us in our need, which poses questions and presents problems which compel thought.[12]

Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God was revealed. God identified with Jesus in his death. This is a very different picture of the God of the Old Testament who seemed to stand at a distance from death, untouched by the deadliness of relationlessness.

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[7] Ibid. p. 70.
[8] Ibid. p. 78.
[9] Ibid. p. 79.
[10] Ibid. p. 81.
[11] Ibid. p. 89.
[12] Ibid. p. 98.

In the death of Jesus, God bears the relationlessness of death which alienates humanity from God. God robs death of its power, and reveals himself as God. God reconciled the world to himself (2 Cor 5: 18f) Through the death of Jesus, death itself was put to death.[13]

In Christ we are set free both to live and to die. Through Christ the relationship continues 'if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's' (Rom14: 8) This is a marked contrast to the Old Testament worldview. Nothing can separate us from God, this is very reassuring.

I was quite taken with Jungel's comment about anxiety about death. 'We should meet anxiety about death with concern for life. Anxiety about death is anxiety about relationlessness. Concern for life is concern for relationships'. And another thought of his to do with relationships – 'One can die at peace only when one could have continued to live in peace with others'.[14]

Jungel's book was thought-provoking and emphasized how Jesus' life, death and resurrection brought about a profound change to the way people viewed death and life. Jesus was the pivotal turning point.

**A bit more on the Old Testament and New Testament worlds**

I was interested in the worldviews that Jungel painted of both the Old Testament and New Testament times, and read a little further on that, for this is the background that our scriptures are written against and help inform us of people's understanding of the time.

To do this I looked at a portion of a weighty tome by Tom Wright called 'The Resurrection of the Son of God'. He began by looking at the ancient non-Jewish (Greek) world, where resurrection was not something that happened. Once people had 'gone by the road of death' they did not return. Apparently a well known epitaph of the time went like this: 'I wasn't. I was, I am not, I don't care'.[15]

Homer spoke of the shades, ghosts and phantoms of the underworld. They were in no way fully human beings. Hades held no comfort, only a profound sense of loss. It was a place of gloom – dreary and monotonous, and a place of terror. These views remained powerful well into the early Christian period.[16] There were some who thought there would be elements of normal life and buried treasures with the dead. And some believed they would meet friends again.

Homer saw 'self' as the physical body, dead. For him the 'soul' flies off to at best a half life. And Plato, who lived in the New Testament period, saw 'self' as the true person –

[13] Ibid. p. 110.
[14] Ibid. p. 129.
[15] Wright, N. 'The Resurrection of the Son of God'. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 2003. p. 33.
[16] Ibid. p. 43.

the soul, while its corpse is the ghost. The soul survives the body, and is delighted to do so it wouldn't want to be brought back. Plato saw Hades not as a place of gloom, but rather a place offering a range of pleasing activities. Blessing awaited the virtuous and judgement would bring truth and justice to bear at last.[17]

Wright contends that in the Middle Ages, Christianity got Platonised with some of these views.[18]

Well, what of the Jewish world view of the Old Testament? There seems to be general agreement that for much of the Old Testament the idea of resurrection was, 'to put it at its strongest, deeply asleep, only to be woken by echoes from later times and texts'.[19] Death itself was sad and tinged with evil. It certainly wasn't seen as a happy release of the soul from the prison house of the body. The people of that time believed in the goodness and god-givenness of life in this world. There was some tension between death as the natural ending of all mortal life, and death as punishment of sin (Genesis 2: 17, 3: 3 and 3: 22).

The focus was very much on the living God as being the only source of true life and wisdom.

Death was regarded as a one way street, on which those behind can follow but those ahead can not turn back. 'Death meant the body returns to the dust and the breath of God who gave it. So this meant that it was not that an immortal part of the person goes to live with God, but that God who breathed life's breath into human nostrils in the first place will simply withdraw it into his own possession'.[20]

For we who are so individualistic, it may be hard to grasp that the focus of the Old Testament writers was not upon the fate of humans after death, rather on the fate of Israel and her promised land. There were some hints in the Psalms about life beyond the grave, but where we find these hints we are reminded that it is not based on anything in the human makeup (eg an immortal soul), but on God and God alone.

'Nobody doubts that the Old Testament speaks of the resurrection of the dead but nobody can agree on what it means, where the idea came from, or how it relates to the other things the scriptures say about the dead' – but the Jewish world of Jesus' and Paul's day looked back to these texts as the principal sources for their widespread belief in resurrection'.[21]

The passage from Ezekiel about the dry bones and God's breath is probably the most famous of all resurrection passages in the Old Testament. It is allegorical or metaphorical and its original purpose was to provide a highly charged and vivid metaphor

[17] Ibid. p. 49.
[18] Ibid. p. 50.
[19] Ibid. p. 85.
[20] Ibid. p. 98.
[21] Ibid. p. 108.

of renewal. It links with the common hope of Israel – that God would restore her fortunes at last.[22]

Wrights urges people to take note that talk of resurrection (from Homer onward) was not used to denote 'life after death' in general (for as we have heard the great majority of the ancients believed in it and had complex and fascinating beliefs and practices), but other than within Judaism and Christianity, they did not believe in resurrection. This denoted a new embodied life that would follow whatever 'life after death' there might be.[23]

Wright wanted to be very clear about this point. Resurrection meant bodily life **after** 'life after death'. It is what **will** happen to people who are at present dead – not what has **already** happened.[24]

And what then of the New Testament world? Tom Wright has this to say:

'In the first century, resurrection meant new life after a period of being dead. Some Jews offered it as a long time future hope, virtually all Christians claimed that it had happened to Jesus and would happen to them in the future. A fresh living embodiement following a period of death-as-a-state. Nobody (except Christians in respect of Jesus), thought that this had already happened, even in isolated cases'.[25]

By the time that early Christianity burst upon an unsuspecting world, both Jewish and Greek, the Jewish belief in bodily resurrection had made its way into the consciousness, not least the Greek-speaking Bible-reading consciousness, of Jews both in Palestine and in the Diaspora.[26]

Similar points emerge in Wright's book, as appeared in Jungel's. The ancient world, both the non-Jewish and Jewish, had some beliefs about life after death in terms of half-existence, gloom etc. but the change that occurred that instigated talk of resurrection, came through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was a decisive happening. It was the foundation for deliverance from death, and for the assurance of ongoing relationship with God. It was through God's grace in Christ that this happened, not through any particular worth of individual's. God's love in Christ brought relationship. This was a huge change in how people viewed death and in how they lived.

**What happens after death?**

It seems that people have many questions and beliefs about what happens after death. For those who have been bereaved it is a matter of some importance to them to want to

[22] Ibid. p. 119.
[23] Ibid. p. 83.
[24] Ibid. p. 108.
[25] Ibid .p. 31.
[26] Ibid. p. 200.

know what has happened to their loved one. There are a variety of ideas about in regard to this. As Christians, what can we affirm in this area?

Richard Holloway in his book Anger, Sex, Doubt and Death tells us that we have to face the fact that scripture does not speak with a single voice about death, and so we must not be too confident about our ability to be precise.
We could:

a) announce that the departed had been taken at death into paradise and were now with the Lord by basing our theology on St Luke – Luke 23: 39-43
b) argue that the dead sleep in the Lord until the last trumpet summons them to judgement from all the ends of the earth – Paul in 1 Cor 15.
c) interpret the raising of Lazarus literally, and be puzzled about how it was with him between his death and being called forth from the tomb four days later by Jesus.
d) wonder about the theme that says some of the disciples wouldn't die before the return of Christ and in particular the rumour re the beloved disciple not dying – John 21: 22-23.[27]

Rowell agrees that there are differing views in the scriptures 'Christian eschatology straddled uneasily a sense of immediate sharing after death in the worship of the heavenly places and a waiting for the fulfillment of resurrection at the end of time.'[28]

Holloway has some interesting, and perhaps provocative, things to say.

'We run into difficulties in interpreting Scripture if we insist on an inner coherence, a harmonic whole, instead of a series of partial and inconsistent insights. There is no systematic theory in the New Testament about the status of the dead, nor should we expect one. The Christian faith is not a prepackaged system, like a computer user's manual that answers all our questions and anticipates many we would never dream of asking. It is a dynamic personal relationship that constantly unfolds with the drama and surprise of any friendship between interesting people.'[29]

Paul proclaims the fact that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ God has given us a pledge and promise of the redemption of the whole of creation from change and decay. He has given us a foretaste, a first instalment of his plan for the whole creation. Eph 1: 9-10

'As with salvation, so with resurrection – our hope lies in God alone. …'our destiny beyond death is something that comes freely from the gracious power of God, and not from any undying element in our own character.[30]

[27] Holloway, R. 'Anger, sex, doubt and death'. SPCK. London. 1992. p. 96.
[28] Rowell, G. Changing patterns: Christian beliefs about death and the future life. In: Jupp, P and Rogers, T (eds). 'Interpreting Death: Christian theology and pastoral practice.' Cassell, London. 1997. p. 18.
[29] 'Anger, sex, doubt and death', p. 99.
[30] Ibid. p. 102.

And we find that the old question of the immortality of the soul comes up again. People talk of their loved one's soul having 'gone from the body'. What has the apostle Paul have to say on this? 'Paul does not put his trust in an immortal human soul, in some element in the human personality that survives death and escapes from the prison of the body at death into a new sphere of being. But it is difficult to avoid using this kind of language. Indeed, some Christian philosophers, following Plato, would argue for the existence in each of us of an immortal soul. We do not know if such a reality exists, or how we might prove or disprove it, but its existence is certainly not the basis of the Christian hope. Paul is quite clear about this. Our hope is in God alone, in death as in life.'[31]

'In other words, Christian hope is an abiding trust in the God who called us out of nothing into life and who will call us again to life out of the second nothing of death. We have no security in ourselves, no false hopes, no naïve longings. Our only ground of hope is the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead as 'the first fruits of them that slept.'[32]

Rather than putting an emphasis on the human soul achieving some kind of release and fulfillment away from the body, we are reminded that our hope lies in God. We die into God, and it is in God we find our fulfillment.

I found Marcus Borg's writings about salvation and after-life to be very helpful. He admits to being agnostic about an after-life, he simply does not know. [33] While he believes there is something beyond death rather than nothing, he has no detailed beliefs. As Holloway has said, there are a diversity of beliefs about the afterlife within the Christian tradition. Borg poses a number of questions like: does after life begin at the moment of death or only at the end of time, Christians have believed both. Is entry into a blessed after life all about grace? Is there a requirement? If a requirement, is it really a religion of works? If by grace does everyone go to heaven? And is heaven only for Christians? Is their continuity between this life and the next? Will we have bodies of some kind? Will relationships persist, will we see each other again? Popular Christianity says so.[34]

But Borg believes that there are indications in the New Testament of discontinuity rather than continuity.[35] Remember when the Sadducees question Jesus regarding the woman who married 7 brothers in sequence. Jesus said 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven.' (Mark 12: 18-27) And Paul speaks of the physical body as being quite different to the spiritual body with which the dead are raised (1 Cor 15: 35-57). So there is not a resumption of previous existence, but entry into a different kind of existence.

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[31] Ibid. p. 102.
[32] Ibid. p. 104.
[33] Borg. M. 'The God We Never Knew'. Harper San Francisco. 1998. p. 171.
[34] Ibid. pp. 172-173.
[35] Ibid. p. 174.

We can see that there are many beliefs and puzzlements about the afterlife. Martin Luther expressed our not-knowing about death in this way: 'We can know as much about life beyond death as a fetus traveling down the birth canal about to be born can know about the world it is about to enter. How much is that? Nothing.' Yet his analogy affirms that there is something at the end of the journey.[36]

Borg asserts that in the midst of all uncertainty about the after life, we can be confident of one thing – when we die, we do not die into nothingness but we die into God. We hear the truth of this expressed in the following:

'If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's' (Romans 14: 8)

and the well known verse

'Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ' (Romans 8: 38)

For all the questions that the mystery of death brings, we find assurance in the continued presence of God. Again and again we hear of God's grace to humanity that transcends all our striving for knowledge and desire for neat answers.

While reading in this area I came across Henri Nouwen's book, Our Greatest Gift, which I found very helpful. In the area of resurrection and afterlife he had this to say:

'Saying to dying people: 'Don't be afraid. After your death you will be resurrected as Jesus was, meet all your friends again and be forever happy in the presence of God' somehow doesn't take death seriously enough and suggests that, after death everything will be basically be the same – except for our troubles. Nor does it take seriously Jesus himself, who didn't live through his own death as if it were little else than a necessary passage to a better life. And, finally, it doesn't take seriously the dying who, like we, know nothing about what is beyond this time – and place – bound existence.

'The Resurrection is not a solution for our problems about dying and death. It's not the happy ending to our life's struggle, nor is it the big surprise that God has kept in store for us. No, the Resurrection is the expression of God's faithfulness to Jesus and to all God's children. Through the Resurrection, God is saying to Jesus, 'You are, indeed, my Beloved Son, and my love is everlasting;' and to us: 'You indeed are my Beloved children and my love is everlasting'. The Resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost, not even our mortal bodies! The Resurrection, therefore, doesn't answer any of our curious questions about life after death, such as "How will it be? How will it look?' It does, however, reveal to us that, indeed love is stronger than death. After that revelation we

[36] Ibid. p. 175.

have to remain silent and leave the 'whys, wheres, hows and whens' behind….and simply trust'.[37]

Nouwen's comments resonate with the other authors that I have read. Our focus and our hope lies in God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ. What belongs to God will never get lost. When we ask about eternal life we can read in John 17: 3 'This is eternal life: to know God'.

Watson puts it quite eloquently in his book 'Sorrow and Hope'. 'There is a widespread understanding that the Christian hope is one of the survival of death. That an intrinsically immortal soul, which is the essential reality of the human person and which is housed for the duration of this life in a physical body. This is body-soul dualism – Neo-Platonic idea of the spiritual ideal in contrast to the physical and corrupting reality. But the biblical hope which developed throughout the Testaments is not one of survival, but of resurrection. Eternal life is not an intrinsic property of our ethereal soul. It is the gift of God through Jesus Christ.[38]

Again we hear that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basis for our understanding for what may happen at death. Eternal life is strongly connected with God in Christ – not something that we attain through our own efforts.

This section has revealed the different understandings we find in the biblical texts about what happens after death. There are many questions we may ask for which no definitive answers are forthcoming. But, again we find the assurance of our hope being in God alone, and that death cannot separate us from that love of God.

**What about Pre-destination?**

I have to admit that I have always thought that the doctrine of pre-destination was very strange and I have mainly just ignored thinking about it for that reason! But perhaps this time of study leave is the time to try and get my mind around it, and perhaps it ties in a bit with the thought patterns around that all that happens in life is determined by God.

To explore this area, I turned to a chapter in Graham Redding's book 'Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ'. Here we read that Calvin reflected on the election of Israel in the Old Testament, and raises two points that become pivotal to his doctrine of predestination. Firstly, by eternal decree one people were particularly chosen, and others rejected and secondly, the basis for this particular choice was God's freely given love. God's choice was made without regard to human worth.[39] So the emphasis here is on God's grace. But the flip side is that the reprobate are those for whom, by God's 'just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgement, the door of life has been barred and

[37] Nouwen, H. Our Greatest Gift. A meditation on Dying and Caring. Hodder and Stoughton. London. 1994. pp. 116-117.
[38] Watson, N. Sorrow and Hope: Preaching at Funerals. Grove Pastoral Series. 2001. p. 11.
[39] Redding, G. Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ. T & T Clark Ltd. London. 2003. p. 93.

have been given over to damnation'. [40] It is not even that God may have foreknowledge of how a person will live in the world, their future works and merits, and do the election on that. No, it is an entirely free act of the divine will.

Well, doesn't that seem harsh? Through no fault of their own, it appears that some are destined to damnation! How does that fit in with our image of a loving God who desires relationship?

Daniel Migliore in his book Faith seeking understanding has this to say:

'Few doctrines in the history of Christian theology have been as misunderstood and distorted, and few have caused as much controversy and distress, as the doctrine of the eternal decrees of God or double predestination. Although taught in some form by many classical theologians – Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin – this doctrine has often been a distinctive mark of the Reformed theological tradition. The Westminster Confession, for example, states that by God's secret decrees and for the manifestation of God's glory, from all eternity "some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death'. Thus stated, the doctrine of election seems to make God an arbitrary tyrant and an enemy of human freedom. The result of this teaching appears to be virtually indistinguishable from fatalism. Far from good news, the doctrine that from eternity God has decreed some to salvation and others to damnation is "dreadful", as Calvin himself declared it.[41]

It would seem that both Calvin and Augustine were much more disposed to talk about election than about reprobation.[42] And Redding is of the view that over time Calvin's doctrine of predestination became elevated and became much more judicial than was intended.[43]

Why is this doctrine important? Well, after reading about it for some time, the light finally went on for me! The point this doctrine is trying to make is that it is all about God's grace. People can not assume they are 'saved' because of the way they live or the good works they do. People cannot be complacent or indolent. It has nothing to do with their individual worth. Rather, it is God's free act of grace. As the words of Philip Yancey go (I think it's him) 'There is nothing you can do to make God love you less. And there is nothing you can do to make God love you more'. The doctrine stresses the equality of all in the eyes of God. It seems to me that the flip side, reprobation, was an unfortunate by-product of this idea.

As Redding points out, the elect have a firm assurance of salvation which cannot be overturned by any failure, and so good works are not a condition of grace by which you

[40] Ibid. p. 93.
[41] Migliore, D. Faith Seeking Understanding. An Introduction to Christian Theology. Williams Eerdmans. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1991. p. 75.
[42] 'Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ, in the Reformed Tradition', p. 95.
[43] Ibid p. 186.

earn God's favour, but rather are a sign of being in a state of grace. [44] I understand that the doctrine grew out of a pastoral concern for people who felt unsure of their salvation.

Now, theologians Barth and Reid found a weakness in Calvin's doctrine. They contend it is grounded in a hidden divine decree that exists apart from God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. That is, we end up with a dichotomy in the Godhead. The grace by which all creation has been reconciled to God in Christ. Is Christ fully God or not? God's 'Yes' to humanity in election is then overwhelmed by his 'No' in reprobation.[45]

It seems to me that this dichotomy has been responsible for people's struggle with the doctrine through the ages. The good news of God's grace gets lost in the seemingly harsh and indiscriminating idea of reprobation. Leading on from this doctrine, we are faced with thinking about Calvin's doctrine of atonement. If some are destined to be 'saved' and some consigned to damnation, what then does that say about atonement?

There has been much debate over the years about whether Calvin advocated a position of limited atonement. R T Kendall published a book in 1979 'Calvin and English Calvinism' which claimed that universal atonement was fundamental to Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance and posits that as far as Calvin was concerned, if Christ did not die for the sins of **all** humankind, then one cannot be certain that one's sins are forgiven.[46] 'There seems to be solid support for Kendall's assertion that while Calvin taught a doctrine of universal atonement, he also taught a doctrine of predestination in which faith was limited to the elect….He could do this because, unlike the federal Calvinists who followed him, he did not link the doctrine of election and atonement in a logical order of cause and effect" [47]

Redding concludes his chapter by saying that what God has done for us and all humankind in Christ seemed to get replaced by what **we** must do to know that we are among the elect.[48]

Barth had this to say:

'In the judgement of Jesus Christ which we must all go to meet, it is not a question of establishing that some are righteous and others sinners. In God's decision and man's election and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ it has already been decided that in ourselves and by ourselves we are all sinners, but that being saved through the complete incarnation of the Son of God we are all righteous…In face of this judgement there can be only one question, namely Do I really look *for Him?* Do I *believe* that He is my only and my complete salvation? That and that alone is what will be decided at the Judgement'.[49]

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[44] Ibid p. 95.
[45] Ibid p. 98.
[46] Ibid p. 99.
[47] Ibid p. 101.
[48] Ibid p. 187.
[49] Ibid p. 119.

I would recommend Redding's book for an indepth look at the Reformed Tradition.

Migliore believes that the biblical theme of election is doxological, in that it praises the free grace of God.[50] We see that in Jesus, God chooses to be freely gracious to both Jew and Gentile (Romans 11: 25-36). And 'God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love (Ephesians 1: 4)

But the development of the doctrine of election went awry when it was made to serve purposes that it was never intended to serve. 'The doxological intention of the doctrine has been obscured by a variety of motives; the desire to explain why some hearers accept while others reject the gospel message (Augustine); the determination to follow rigorously what appeared to be the logical implications of God's omnipotence and providential governance of the world (Aquinas); the insistence that the righteousness of God is evident in the damnation of the reprobate just as God's mercy is displayed in the salvation of the elect (Westminster Confession).[51]

Migliore believes that our knowledge of election has no other basis than the unfathomable love of God for the world in Jesus Christ.[52] 'Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ' (Romans 8: 39). God desires everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2: 4) and Jesus commissions the church to proclaim the gospel to all people (Matthew 28: 19f). How then can we set limits to the electing grace of God?

Migliore also believes that the goal of election is the creation of a people of God and not, in the first instance, the salvation of solitary individuals. [53] In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were the object of election (Leviticus 26: 12). In the New Testament, Jesus is the object of election and all who are united with him.

He contends that if any are excluded from the community of grace at the end, it is because they have persisted in opposition to God's grace, not because they were excluded before the foundation of the world. Marcus Borg would disagree with Migliore's conclusion. As he says 'If my participation in an afterlife is dependent on my free-will choice to respond to God, then my salvation is dependent on something I do. So it becomes a requirement, works'.[54]

It was good to spend a bit of time looking at the area of predestination and the implications that flow from it. God's grace is what is to be celebrated and acknowledged. 'There is nothing that we can do that can make God love us more. There is nothing we can do that can make God love us less'.

[50] 'Faith Seeking Understanding' p. 75.
[51] Ibid pp 75-76.
[52] Ibid p. 76.
[53] Ibid p. 77.
[54] 'The God We Never Knew' p. 177.

Our view on whether atonement is universal or limited will have implications for how we conduct funerals and in how we interact with people in our ministry. Can we really set limits on God's grace? I do not believe that we can.

**Getting back to one of the statements – Fatalism, Determinism and Freewill**

I mentioned how some people seemed to think all of life, including death, was planned (whether by God or by 'the universe), and some seem almost fatalistic. How then does this tie in with the idea that as humans we have free will, and that we make choices for which we need to take responsibility. I went to The Encyclopaedia of Religion to find some information about this.

Fate - denotes the idea that everything in human lives, in society, and in the world itself, takes place according to a set, immutable pattern. Fatalism is the term for human's submission to fate in resignation. Now this is not to be confused with determinism, which believed science was on its way to uncovering the laws of all cause and effect relationships in the world. There is no religious tradition in which a notion of fate is supreme.[55] In fatalism there is an attitude of defeat in the belief that the future is as inevitable and fixed as the past (renunciation of one's own reason, and responsibility). 'Generally the biblically rooted religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, look askance at every semblance of a fate that could be ascertained apart from God'. Now, they have this to say: 'Calvin's predestination, which is often mistaken for a form of determinism or fatalism, is in fact something very different, and Calvin took great pains, with all the philosophical means at his disposal, to explain man's ultimate destiny as God's decision, made within the mystery of God's eternity.[56]

From some of my reading it would appear that in times of crisis, people can become quite fatalistic in their outlook on life.

Free-will - conviction that as individuals, human beings are endowed with the capacity for choice of action, for decision among alternatives, and specifically that, given an innate moral sense, people can freely discern good and evil – choose the good, though they often do not.[57]

Determinism – philosophical view that given certain initial conditions, everything that ensues is bound to happen as it does – and in no other possible way, thus nothing in nature is contingent, nor is there any room for human freedom.[58]

Now – most major religions say that humans are born with freedom of choice – people choose and take moral responsibility for those choices. Determinism is seen as a negation

[55] Eliade, M (ed). The Encyclopaedia of Religion. Volume 5. MacMillan Publishing Company, New York. 1987. p. 290.
[56] Ibid. p. 294.
[57] Ibid. p. 419.
[58] Ibid. p. 419.

of free will.[59] But if we believe God is not only omnipotent but also omniscient, doesn't that annul the power of free decision and lead to a contradiction of man being held responsible for some courses of action for which he is not actually responsible?

Christianity emphasizes the freedom of 'man' to the last consequence, although has been an ongoing debate.[60]

Free will and Predestination

'Freewill and predestination constitute a polarity in many of the religions of the world: is salvation determined by a divine choice or is it a matter of personal self-determination? Predestination to be sharply distinguished from some forms of determinism and from fatalism which do necessarily involve the theistic concept of a personal deity making conscious choices'.[61]

These are important philosophies to consider. Fatalism suggests an impersonal determining force, so is distinguishable from a view point that believes everything is planned by God. However if it is true, and it seems to be from what I have read, that Christianity emphasizes the freedom of human beings, we need to think carefully about taking responsibility for our actions while at the same time living in God's grace and providence. We are not puppets without any control over our lives. But we are also not God – we live in God's grace.

**Image of God**

If we go back to the questions and statements that arose in my pastoral work which prompted this study, it seems that there are underlying assumptions about what God is like, about how God acts and so on. Marcus Borg begins a chapter in his book 'The God we never knew' with the sentence 'Tell me your image of God, and I will tell you your theology'.[62] The two are, of course, closely linked. [I have a book entitled 'Good Goats – Healing our Image of God' by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn family which is very helpful reading in this area.]

We often hear people say 'Oh well, it must be God's will' or 'I guess God knows what he's doing' (when some tragedy has happened). Really? Why would God inflict such a thing on individuals or communities? Is God a capricious being? Is God an interventionist? Does God take pleasure in other people's sorrows – No!! It seems that humans need to try and find a direct link between cause and effect in such matters…

People blame a lot on God – even when they don't believe in God! God becomes a projection of primitive attitudes about the world. We can make God in any image it seems. But what do the foundations of our faith tell us?

[59] Ibid. p. 420.
[60] Ibid. p. 421.
[61] Ibid. p. 422.
[62] 'The God We Never Knew' p. 57.

Borg argues that if we see God as King, Judge etc then 'God becomes the internalized overseer, the policeman who never sleeps' or 'God imaged as a high school principal unhappily leafing through our records'.[63] If this is the sort of image that we have of God, then I guess we will see untimely deaths of others as punishment by God. We then go into the mode of feeling that we have to please God – the finger-shaking, judging one. We need to be 'good' now for the sake of heaven later. Is that any way to live? Surely living the Christian life is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now.

Donald Messer in his article 'Patches of Godlight' has this to say. 'I am reminded that how we imagine God makes a major difference as we walk through the valleys of death and grief. Joyce Rupp tells us that if we picture God on our side, rather than against us or as responsible for our pain, we not only are closer to the biblical portrait, but also find spiritual strength to face each day. God does love us, even when we do not trust God or when we despair that God is absent.'[64]

Think of the Psalms – where people cry out to God in their pain and anger and confusion, but again and again and again find God's faithfulness in the midst of it all.

Messer goes on to talk of God this way:

'The God of Jesus Christ is a suffering God, who is wounded by our tragedies and hurting because of our sorrow; a God who lost an only son on a cross, thanks to human cruelty and injustice; a God who does not punish us for our sins by sending sickness; a God who Jesus tells us does not control every detail of life – accidents happen and towers fall on both the good and the bad - a God who cares and cries'.[65]

Where do we begin to talk about our image of God? Surely we don't just pluck ideas of the air. Our starting point in Jesus – God's self-disclosure. Jesus Christ is our yardstick for when we are talking about God because we are told that 'Jesus is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1: 15). In him we see what God is like. So, it is to Christ that we must keep referring when talking in this area. He is the foundation of our talk and his life and works demonstrate the divine.

Many people seem to have very distorted ideas about what God is like. We may hear them say about some tragedy 'It was God's will'. Turnbull in her booklet 'Who lives happily every after?' writes 'If you hear people say is was God's will, remember that most of us don't think God goes around welding knives, pulling triggers or guiding steering wheels'.

[63] Ibid. p. 66.
[64] Messer, D. 'Patches of Godlight' in Weaver, A and Stone, H (eds). Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth. Abingdon Press, Nashville. 2005. p. 82.
[65] Ibid. p. 83.

We may only see in a mirror dimly, and we can never get close to describing what the fullness of God is like, but what we do have is God's revelation in Christ. We must point people to Christ in order for them to gain a glimpse of what God might really be like. And I believe many will be pleasantly surprised…

**Getting back to one of the questions – 'Will she have two legs in heaven?'**

I stated earlier that I was prompted into this area of study leave through questions that had come up in my pastoral work. As well as looking at theology and scripture etc, I was encouraged by one of the staff members at Knox Centre of Ministry and Leadership to ask other ministers how they would respond to one of the questions. So I did. I told the scenario about the man whose wife had died, and his question 'Will she have two legs in heaven?' (one leg had been amputated several years earlier as the result of illness). I have listed below the responses that ministers would make if they were asked the question, 'Will my wife have two legs in heaven?'

- 'Why is that important to you?' Often the question is more important than the answer. Underlying assumptions, ideas etc.

- 'What do you think?' And talk of difference, like the seed and the plant etc.

- Talk of the seed and the plant. 'And every tear will be wiped away'. (Revelation)

- told the story of a minister who visited Karl Barth. While they were talking, his disabled son was playing outside. He asked Karl Barth whether his son would be able to walk properly in heaven. Karl Barth said no, but all that he is will be treasured and celebrated. This story was told by Karl Barth's son. We simply do not know. But to go along with the idea that anyone with disabilities etc will be healed means that they will be different to who they are here and also implies that somehow, here, they are not good enough. But we can affirm the words that 'every tear will be wiped away etc'

- 'Yes'. Believes that God restores all of creation to perfection, to God's original intent. Important to think about what we mean about 'restoration'.

- Would engage with the question by asking 'Who do you love more – the one with two legs, or the one with one?'

- 'We simply do not know – but let's talk about what that might mean to you'.

- 'Its an interesting question – what are your own thoughts about it?'

- 'I don't know. But in the scriptures Paul talks about the life that we experience now, not being the finished product. Whenever we die there will be a fullness to

come. Any deficiencies will no longer be a concern. There will be a transformed physicality. And the Bible talks about continuity as well as discontinuity'.

- Believes that in death, a person becomes more fully who they are. Whether they have two legs or not will no longer be a concern. Who they truly are is beyond that external physicality. [I also talked with this person about the disability perspective, and the pastoral implications of talking about being restored to wholeness, and noted that it is quite different to a person whose life has been diminished through aggressive illness and talking about being restored to wholeness]. In death we are in God, and fully who we were intended to be.

In this quite informal study, we see the variety of answers ministers gave to the question. A number felt that the question itself needed a bit of 'unpacking' to ascertain just what the concern was about, and the issues involved. I found this exercise of talking with other ministers about pastoral issues to be very stimulating and informative.

**And this was interesting – the Diana Phenomenon**

During my search around the bookshelves in the Hewitson Library, I came across one of the Grove Publications called 'The Diana Phenomenon' by Francis Bridger. This proved to be a fascinating little book which reflected on the death of Princess Diana in 1997. There are some insights from this publication that are significant to my area of study.

Our author contends that Diana was like a postmodern symbol – invented and reinvented by herself and by the media.[66] She symbolized the age that she lived in; a world which had shifted its focus from corporatist collective to be market-oriented, from goods production to pleasure consumption.[67]

The public felt 'ownership'of Diana. She was always in the newspaper and in magazines, they felt they knew her intimately. When she died the public exerted that feeling of ownership, which is usually reserved for the family at death. It was through their reaction and 'demands' that there was such a funeral.

'In many ways Diana was a projection of people's own hopes and fears – she acted as a condensed symbol who embodied the nation's identity in the mid 90's'.[68] In Diana's lifetime, there had been a deconstruction of community, but that community was reconstructed at her death, the community came together to grieve. Her death prompted 'probably the most extensive act of the globalization of death yet witnessed in the world'.[69]

[66] Bridger, F. The Diana Phenomenon. Grove Publication, Cambridge. 1998. p.8.
[67] Ibid. p. 9.
[68] Ibid. p. 11.
[69] Ibid. p. 11.

Postmodern culture has little room for organized religion, but it actively encourages the search for the spiritual – and this can be as vague and as mystical as people want. In amongst all of this, there seems to be a great need for people 'to locate the loved one in a benign place such as heaven or peaceful afterlife. There is usually no reference to Christianity's belief in the resurrection.[70] There is a 'pick and mix' attitude to spirituality, and Diana was into that as well. She also practiced love and care of the marginalized, which is pretty close to orthodox Christianity.

I quote from the book about Diana's funeral (aspects of it will surely ring bells)

'..although Anglican in form, the service in fact amounted to a hotchpotch of ingredients held together not by any religious sentiment or beliefs but by a combination of Earl Spencer's speech and Elton John's song. Neither of these contained any theology or identifiable Christian belief; but there is no doubt that they expressed the popular mood. It is significant that the Earl's tribute-cum-polemic literally drew applause from the crowds outside Westminster Abbey and in the Royal Parks of London as they watched the service on giant video screens erected for the purpose.

Thirdly, the service was notable as much for what it omitted as for what it included. It contained, for example, no sermon or homily. The reading by Tony Blair of 1 Corinthians 13 stood alone as ministry of the word. There was no attempt to offer a Christian interpretation of death (or life for that matter). The proclamation of the resurrection was entirely absent, except for the Scripture sentences accompanying the entry of the coffin, which were sung and therefore probably not comprehended by the majority of spectators. And since the power of the sentences resides in their stark and dramatic proclamation as the coffin enters the church, their effect was lost.

In fact, it could be argued that the two most striking contributions – Earl Spencer's speech and Elton John's 'Candle in the Wind' – although immensely moving, pointed away from the Christian faith rather than towards it. What the crowds applauded most in the speech was its lambasting of the tabloid press and the Royal Family. This was done in tones authentically human but hardly Christian. Similarly, Elton John's reworking of a song originally written with Marilyn Monroe in mind touched people's emotions but said nothing of any religious value.

Finally, there was the odd spectacle of Earl Spencer's addressing Diana in the second person singular as if she were somehow present. 'Today is the chance to say thank you for the way your brightened our lives…We have all despaired at our loss over the past week and only the strength of the message you gave us…has afforded us the strength to move forward'. [71]

Did the Earl believe that Diana was somehow still there in spirit as well as body? If so, did this signal an end to Protestant attitudes to the dead?'[72]

[70] Ibid. p. 22.
[71] Ibid, pp 23-24.
[72] Ibid. p. 24.

Frances Bridger makes the point that modern funerals are essentially memorial services with a bit of religious language thrown in. 'we live in a post-Christian culture which retains some of the language and thought-forms of Christianity but severs them from their theological roots.'[73] 'Many funerals today are like many others in contemporary society – postmodern in ambience while retaining a traditional shell'.[74]

In his book 'Talking about Death', Griffin notes that we have inherited a tradition of judgement, heaven, hell, and in some cases purgatory. 'These symbols which the early church used try and express something of their hopes and beliefs gradually became translated into literal things and places. But more and more people can't deal with that in this more modern age. 'To twentieth century eyes there is no place for a heaven 'up there' or a hell 'down there' and increasingly the symbols have become discarded'.[75] But, have we really thought about what those symbols were trying to express? The church seems to either insist on using old symbols that don't work anymore, or run from the subject altogether. [76]

These books point out well what we are beginning to know about our world. It is fragmented and pluralistic – and we no longer share the same assumptions about the meaning of life and death. Christianity is no longer a framework that people share. So there is a big challenge, and opportunity, for the church in this area. How are we to engage with the demands of a post-modern world and at the same time maintain an integrity about what we proclaim and what we stand for?

Questions that arise:

Is it appropriate to talk to the person in the coffin? What does that say theologically about death? How does it fit with the Maori traditions of addressing the dead person?

Are our funerals becoming more like wakes? Some ministers I spoke to believe they are and see that as a negative thing. They believe the services have become drenched in sentimentality and we often do not hear what the church believes about death and resurrection. Others encourage the telling of stories etc at the funeral. They feel that for too long the church has narrowly prescribed what form a funeral service will take. What balance is needed?

**Looking at our context**

It is important for us to look at the context we live in when considering matters of death and grieving. As we have seen through the illustration of Princess Diana's death, we live

[73] Ibid. p. 23.
[74] Ibid. p. 24.
[75] Griffin, G. Talking about death. The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne. 1976. p. 6.
[76] Ibid. p. 7.

in a very pluralistic world, where people belief a real mix of things about life and about death. What is the situation in New Zealand? A book that looks like a very good resource is 'Last Words: Approaches to Death in New Zealand's Cultures and Faiths' which has been compiled by Margot Schwass.

The Introduction has been written by Joris de Bres, the Race Relations Commissioner of the time, and I include some of that introduction.

'There was a time in New Zealand when only two traditions of death and dying – Maori and Pakeha – were widely observed. Most funeral services, too, were likely to follow one or other of the Christian denominations. In recent years, things have become a lot more complex. Not only are New Zealanders now much more ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse, but attitudes to death and the way we care for the terminally ill have also been challenged or changed with the advent of new medicines, biotechnology and palliative care. Today there is a greater awareness of cultural diversity, and more choice about the way we die. And funerals can be secular or religious, traditional or contemporary, complex or simple.

Last Words was commissioned by the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand to recognize the ways in which different groups in New Zealand approach death at the start of the twenty-first century. Essentially a handbook, it identifies the cultures and faiths with a significant numerical presence here and, with information provided by these groups, offers an account of their practices and beliefs to do with death and dying. …..

Death's universal dimensions – fear, loss, anxiety, the desire for reconciliation and forgiveness, the need to give and receive love – are always present, as we approach death ourselves, care for the terminally ill, or support the bereaved. But death always has, also, a particular meaning for individuals. For many of us, that meaning is shaped by our culture, spirituality or religion….. As this book makes clear, the line between culture and religion is blurred and sometimes contested'.[77]

I feel it is beyond the scope of my study leave report to try and summarise this important book. But I draw it to people's attention as a resource, and also to emphasise the need to recognize the multi-cultural, multi-religious world that New Zealand is. This must make a difference to how people view death, image God, find answers to life's questions.

There is a section in the book which sets out the PCANZ's approach to death, which was prepared by the Rev Joan Ross. It states that from a church whose origins lie with early Scottish settlers, it is today a very diverse and multicultural community of faith. There is Te Aka Puaho (the Maori Synod), and also many churches with links to specific Pacific Island and Asian communities. Approximately one-third of its churches are part of uniting congregations, with other denominations. And there is a wide range of attitudes to doctrine and worship as well.

[77] Schwass, M (compiled). Last words. Approaches to death in New Zealand's Cultures and Faiths. Bridget Williams Books Ltd. 2005. p. 7.

The Presbyterian Directory of Worship states:

> 'In the face of death Christians affirm with tears and joy the hope of the gospel. Christians do not bear bereavement in isolation but are sustained by the power of the Spirit and the community of faith. The Church offers a ministry of love and hope to all who grieve'.[78]

This chapter states 'Presbyterians believe deeply that life is sacred, and that God is present in all life and death experiences'. [79] It goes on to say 'Beliefs about life beyond death vary widely among Presbyterians. Many would think of it in relation to the resurrection of Christ, and the assurance 'Because I live, you will live also (John 14: 19), which is read at many Presbyterian funerals. Some may have a quite specific image of an afterlife in which they will be reunited with loved ones. For others, it is enough to have faith in God's care: the exact nature of what lies before them is unimportant. Still others may have quite abstract concepts about what it means to be with God after death'.[80]

I believe this book will prove to be an excellent resource for ministers living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Conclusion**

A number of topics have been covered in this section. All of them have helped me to clarify some of the issues that come up when talking with people on matters of life and death. It is evident that there are many different views and insights within the biblical witness and our reformed tradition, but that doesn't mean we have nothing that we can affirm. One theme that kept emerging was the priority of God's grace to humanity. God's grace and the character and life of Christ form the foundation from which we draw insights and understandings in the living out of our faith. If we keep referring back to our understanding of them, I believe we have a good basis on which to engage with the big questions of faith, life and death. It is not all about proving nice neat answers, but about engaging with the questions, finding the underlying assumptions, seeing how they relate to our understanding of God and exploring with our people how faith helps us with the mystery of death and life.

[78] Ibid. p. 146.
[79] Ibid. p. 146.
[80] Ibid. p. 147.

## PART B: MINISTERS AND THEIR GRIEF

This is a whole topic in its own right, and I have not spent as much time on it as I might have liked, but I was able to find a few things which I found helpful.

In the foreword to the book Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth by Weaver and Stone, William Willimon reflects about some of the challenges of ministry. He recalls,

> 'When a little 4 year old was killed in an accident I had to stand up two days later and say something on behalf of God to a church so filled with anger and hurt that you could hardly breathe. At that time, I wondered if I really wanted to be God's spokesperson or not'.[81]

This points to the reality that ministers are affected by events in their ministry, and also that the church has an important role to play at such a time. Ministry does not grant us immunity from the pain of bereavement, the emptiness and pain of loss. But we also remember that we do not grieve as those with no hope

### Processing Grief

From conversations I have had with others, taking funerals can take its toll on ministers. There are times when there is a whole run of funerals in a parish, and these not only take time in preparation, in leading the service, in spending time with the family, but they also impact with the loss of people from our communities. A minister once said to me that after you have been in a parish for a while, you begin to bury your friends. Over time, relationships develop, and when members of the parish die, it is like part of the extended family dying. As ministers we care for their families and friends. We take the funeral service. But what do we do with our own feelings, our own grief at losing this person from our church family?

Also, taking funerals can bring to the surface 'our own stuff' – perhaps taking a funeral for an older man can remind us of our own father's death. Or, as one minister said, whenever he takes a service for an older person about his parent's age, he feels an 'anticipatory grief' for what is to come when his parents die.

In the course of my study leave I have asked a number of ministers what they do with their grief, and some of their responses follow.

- use journaling to record their feelings, what they shall miss about that person, what they have valued

- make sure that after a service they leave plenty of time in the rest of the day to 'recover', have a bit of time out

[81] 'Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth' p. 11.

- if it has been a burial, one minister would return to the graveside the next day by himself, to reflect and say his own goodbyes

- ensure that the casket is at the church well before the funeral, so that he can spend a little time reflecting

- journaling, trying to have some quiet time after the service, Supervision

- talking it through with someone else. Being both professional and 'real' at the funeral. Remembering that the service is 'not about me and how I am feeling' but also not being too distant or contained.

- Supervision

- Supervision. Talks it through with wife. Allows self to cry.

Many ministers I spoke to confirmed that taking funerals for people under their pastoral care can be difficult. We can feel particularly close to some, so taking their funeral, while on the one hand being something precious, also drains us. 'The shadow side of ministry penetrates our defences again'.[82]

It seems to me that a number of ministers, and their parishioners, believe that the minister simply goes into the professional mode to take a funeral, that it is a 'function' of their job. As Halbert Weidner says 'Some ministers and staff may choose to 'handle' funerals the way mechanics handle cars and even dentists take on tooth decay'. [83]And he goes on to say that some will see the display of their own grief as a betrayal of their function.

Weidner strikes a somewhat mocking tone 'A community is unsettled by the visible grief of its minister. But ministers are not allowed to grieve over their parishioners, their clients, the 'objects' of their pastoral care. That would get in the way of serving them. So a minister should be able to switch from task to task without registering the cost. For some, this means they willingly take up their job as 'a role' and move from role to role and then go home relatively pleased by the rewards of an objective measure of effectiveness. Personal investment and personal cost are neither part of the measure nor of the effectiveness'.[84]

Of course we need to be professional about how we go about our ministry, but there are some warnings here. There are some contemporary expectations that being professional or having professionals around will save us from the 'tattering of life'.[85] And we can

[82] Weidner, H. Grief,loss and death. The shadow side of ministry. The Haworth Pastoral Press, New York. 2006. p. 11.
[83] Ibid. p. 12.
[84] Ibid. p. 19.
[85] Ibid. p. 7.

have this desire to project perfection – wanting people to trust us and so 'we paint ourselves and our colleagues as people without serious faults….we fail to include in our professional image the necessity of dealing with failure and the forgiveness and reconciliation that must follow'.[86] A number of ministers feel reluctant to ask for help when they are supposed to be helping others cope with life issues.

As ministers we need to remind ourselves that we do this ministry through the grace of God, and we need to surrender to that grace. To trust in God. As Harburgh notes, 'a theology of grace takes away the burden of having to measure up.[87]

Weidner has some harsh, but possibly true, words to say:

How many in active ministry don't have a devotional life?
'Now, if anyone wants an excuse not to pray, ministry is as good as it gets. Everything we do we do for God. The work is never done so there is not time for prayer. If we are praying and someone needs us, we go from God to God. So there. We find God everywhere except in our own hearts.'[88]

And he adds, 'Active ministers can take comfort in knowing that surrendering to God has the practical effect of infusing more energy and creativity into pastoral work'. John of the Cross teaches that more gets done the more time spent in prayer. 'We need not imitate monks but we must transform the common Christian spiritual practices and make them part of our lives. The alternative is overwork, TV, the shopping mall, or the asceticism of the runner or weight room'. [89]

I would recommend Halbert Weidner's book – Grief, Loss and Death. The Shadow Side of Ministry'. He doesn't pull any punches about ministers' tendency to be in denial about how they really are.

**Taking funerals for family or close friends**

While we are on this subject, let us consider the situation of minister's taking funerals for close family members and friends. I have done this, and I know many clergy do. Yes, we want to honour the person who has died by 'creating' a service that has dignity and meaning, and we consider it 'something we do to honour them'. But is it a wise thing to do? I was interested to read Susan White's comment on this in her article 'Rituals Lost and Found' in the book 'Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth'.

'…I often admonish my students preparing for ordained ministry to resist, if at all possible, the temptation to preside at the funerals of close family and friends. In times of

[86] Ibid. p. 28.
[87] Harburgh, G. Caring for the Caregiver. Growth models for professional leaders and congregations. An Alban Institute publication, 1992. p. 72.
[88] 'Grief, loss and death. The shadow side of ministry', p. 48.
[89] Ibid. p. 51.

deep grief, I tell them, it is important to lean back and let the rituals of lamentation do their work; I tell them that to focus their attention on orchestrating the liturgical proceedings is the most effective way of short-circuiting their own processes of mourning a loss. The funeral may be the only setting in which it is deemed safe and permissible to cry, and to do so in the company of others, to touch, and to be touched. …It would be expected and desired, of course, that all those who grieve, including clergy, will be part of an open, emotionally healthy support community, that they will be able to lament their loss freely and in their own way, without the constraints of what 'ought' to be done or how they 'should' be handling things. But this is unfortunately not always the case, and busy pastors need to learn when to let go of their ecclesiastical role as worship leader and to embrace the role of a mourner'.[90]

Interestingly, White goes on to describe a time when she was asked to take the funeral for her aunt and she agreed. The funeral 'went well', but she found that while the other family members wept, smiled, remembered, were comforted – she did not experience any of that.[91]

I spoke to a number of ministers about this issue. Some have made the decision not to take family funerals, for the very reasons that White mentions. They feel they want to be together with the family. Having taken such funerals, a number have vowed not to do it again. One minister said we need to be careful about imposing things on our family (say especially if they are not church people) and it could be disturbing to family dynamics if there is dissatisfaction with the way a funeral is conducted and that criticism is leveled against a family member. One minister took the funeral for his father-in-law. It was difficult to be 'up the front taking the service' while his wife and children were upset in the congregation, he would have liked to have been right with them.

Others feel that it is something they like to do for the person who has died, and for the family. It is a precious thing to be able to do and they would never say no to such an invitation. But they admit that it takes its toll on them, that it is emotionally draining and they have felt shattered afterwards.

Expectations may vary from culture to culture as to what is expected of the minister in the family. Sometimes people make a specific request for a family clergy person to take their funeral. Other times the parish minister will take the service.

I think it would be helpful for ministers to think this issue through, and make some decisions before they find themselves thrust into the situation of being asked to take the funeral for a close family member or friend. If you are going to take such services, I would suggest having some strategies in place to assist you. I have found it very helpful to have another minister there to take some of the prayers, and to 'be on call' in case you find taking particular parts of the service, like the committal, too much. This is not being

[90] White, S. Rituals Lost and Found in Weaver, A and Stone H (eds) Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth. Abingdon Press, Nashville. 2005. p. 164.
[91] Ibid. p. 165.

'weak'. This is being human and it also models something to our communities about the reality of death and how it impacts on us all.

**Minister's Self-care**

It was heartening to find a section in Fowler's book. 'Caring through the Funeral' entitled 'The Pastor's Self-care'.

'If you ever want to see what denial is like in the realm of grief, just talk to a pastor who conducts a fair number of funerals over a period of years. Such pastors may feel depressed, have physical problems, feel like crying at anything sentimental, not feel much joy, have marital or other relational difficulties, harbor secret desires to leave their work behind, drink too much, and feel that their interior life is turning to gelatin. But grief? Of course not….[92]

'Pastors who make denial a way of life do not skip a beat performing the rest of their work. They are right back at it after the funeral, or the morning after the funeral at the latest. It is a never-ending cycle of funerals and work. In this regard, pastors and churches do a dance of denial. The pastor never stops working, and the church expects the pastor to keep on keeping on. Neither churches nor pastors realize that funeral after funeral can have a cumulative effect, producing grief that may be profound but unrecognized. It strains credulity that pastors who conduct an average of several funerals per year, anywhere from two or three to ten or more, remain unaffected. Moreover, during this historical time when Protestant churches are aging and declining, whole congregations grieve as an ongoing part of their communal life.[93]

Fowler points out what I have been thinking, that there can be a lot of denial among clergy as to how they really are. I believe that acknowledging the effect of a death on us is an important starting point. Fowler outlines some strategies for dealing with this grief and pain. He recommends that ministers talk to the governing board of the congregation, and propose a plan for giving more time to grieve and mourn following funerals.[94] It may just involve some time for self-reflection, allowing oneself to cry, thinking through the funeral you have taken. It needs to be stressed that this is a legitimate part of ministry. To take this time will be of benefit to oneself, and to the congregation.

He also suggests having the regional church body, in our case the Presbytery, provide a worship service for all ministers on some regular basis. We know that rites are very important for grief and mourning. If we attend such services, they can help us deal with our grief. We can also organize peer support groups with other ministers which will help

[92] Fowler, G. Caring through the Funeral. A Pastor's Guide. Chalice Press, St Louis, Missouri. 2004. p. 173.
[93] Ibid. p. 173.
[94] Ibid. p. 174.

the 'emotionally demanding work of conducting funerals and coping with your grief'.[95] (175).

He sums up his book with this: 'A church whose pastor and members are people of sorrow is a healthier and more caring church than a church whose pastor and members are people of denial'.[96]

**Conclusion**

I believe that ministers need to think seriously about the issues raised in this section. We are in the business of working with people who are experiencing grief, and at the same time, we have our own griefs. Acknowledging how we really are in the aftermath of funerals is important. Taking time to intentionally process our feelings and emotions is time well spent. Attending to our spiritual life needs to have priority. Our regional church bodies have a role to play in providing a service for its ministers in which grief and loss can be acknowledged, and perhaps also other areas of concern like disappointments, hurts etc experienced in ministry.

This is an area I would like to explore further with more ministers, and at the Presbytery level to discover what could be put into place that would be helpful for ministers.

[95] Ibid. p. 175.
[96] Ibid. p. 176.

**Other things I did while on Study Leave**

Attended worship at a number of different Presbyterian churches around Dunedin, and also Mornington Methodist Church.

Participated in the life of the Knox Centre's community, including weekly communion services and forums. The forums included 'The Art of Moderatorship', Work Place Chaplaincy, Mental Health and Religion.

Took a forum with the current students on the area of my study leave.

Went to talk by the Rev Chrys McVey OP on Christian and Muslim dialogu entitled 'The risk and promise of inter-religious dialogue'

Went to talk by Joy Cowley regarding Spirituality.

Attended the funeral for the Rev Frank Nichol, former Principal of Knox Theological Hall.

Attended a farewell function for the Rev Dr John Roxburgh who was retiring from the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

Attended Dunedin Presbytery.

Attended a graduation service from 'The Sycamore Programme', at the Otago Corrections Facility in Milburn. This programme is based on the principles of restorative justice.

Checked out a number of cafes around Dunedin!

Enjoyed socialising with friends and family, and enjoyed having nights without meetings.

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