

Where is God in Dementia?

by Revd Professor John Swinton, Aberdeen University

Many fear dementia more than they fear cancer. We fear that we will lose ourselves; that all our memories, thoughts, stories that make us who we are, will be gone, leaving us in a boundless sea of meaningless experiences.

Yet the writer to the Hebrews is clear about Jesus' promise: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' (Hebrews 13:5-6). In Matthew 28:20, Jesus is in the lives of all people, including those with dementia: 'Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' When we forget everything, Jesus is there.

Perhaps our real fear is not that we will forget, but that we will be forgotten. Maybe people will begin to talk about me as if I am not really present. Perhaps they will lock me away in a place where I am surrounded by strangers. Perhaps people will say, 'He is not the person he used to be.' Or worse, 'She is just a shell.' If I am not the person I used to be; if I am just a shell, then why would anyone care for me and who would they be caring for? Maybe we fear this kind of lostness more than the lostness of our personal forgetting.

We should lament the things that have been lost, but the task of the Church is to accompany people with dementia in faith, hope and love; trusting that God has not abandoned them and that his disciples should not do so either.

When we approach one another like this, the binding power of the Holy Spirit will enable us to be with one another in ways that may be inexpressible, but which are always true, faithful and healing. Having dementia is not the end of our stories.

Taken from a talk by Revd Professor John Swinton, Aberdeen University, one of the keynote speakers at the 'Enabling Church' day conference which took place in Birmingham on Tues 3 June 2014.

Recommended reading for further insights:

Dementia: Living in the Memories of God by John Swinton (Author)
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