

Collins Street Baptist Church  
February 6, 2011  
10.30am & 5.00pm

**When Death Intrudes**  
Psalm 23 & Psalm 116.1-9

**Introduction**

Last Sunday we began a series of four reflections on the question, 'So what?' For all the things we profess to believe as Christians, what difference does our faith make when life falls apart? What difference does faith make in times of disaster, loss, disappointment and heartache? As I confessed last week, these are wretchedly difficult questions for which there are no clear, standard or generic answers. What's more, in the space of 15 minutes on a Sunday morning, realistically all we can do is more clearly identify the questions, before attempting the most tentative exploration, through images and stories, of the perspectives our faith provides. My hope is you will take these questions and perspectives with you and continue the conversation elsewhere.

Today we ask ourselves, what difference does our Christian faith make when death intrudes? For some of us, this is not easy territory to navigate. It's not just a question of theory or theology but one that touches deeply on experiences and memories of the most personal kind. With that reason, we begin with a moment of silence and prayer.

**When death intrudes**

I was woken early on a Sunday morning, about 6.00am by the shrill sound of the telephone. At the other end was the clinical voice of a nurse. 'Mr Holt?' she asked. 'Yes, speaking,' I responded still half asleep. At the time I was a very young and

inexperienced pastor of a small congregation in the outer suburbs. ‘Your parishioner Anne Durdin asked me to call you. You were here at the hospital with her last night, weren’t you?’ she asked, still not a hint of warmth in her voice. ‘Yes, I was,’ I said, my head clearing rapidly as though bracing my heart for what was to come. ‘Anne’s baby Nicholas is dead, a brain haemorrhage, and she has asked for you.’ I paused, stunned. ‘Mr Holt?’, the nurse pressed. ‘I see,’ I finally responded, still struggling to assimilate her words. ‘I see ... I’ll come straight away.’ ‘Good, we’ll see you soon,’ and with that she was gone.

As I made the 45-minute journey to the Women’s Hospital in Carlton, clarity was non-existent. I felt nothing but confusion and dread. It was just two nights before that our small congregation—all of us—crowded into Anne’s hospital room with balloons and streamers to welcome the arrival of baby Nicholas. Anne and Kelvin had struggled for years to conceive. As a church we had prayed with them. We had followed the rollercoaster ride of false starts and miscarriages. We had wept together, prayed together and believed together. The fact that Nicholas had come full term and was finally born was nothing short of a miracle. Our joy that night was real and exuberant. But now ....

As I arrived on the ward, I was immediately led to an isolated room at the end of small passageway. As I walked into the near empty space, I saw Anne and Kelvin sitting alone together in a corner near the window, Anne still clutching the child in her arms. The nurse left the room, closing the door behind her. As I moved toward them, Anne faintly smiled, her face wet with tears, and then she held the baby out to me to hold. ‘Would you pray for him?’ she urged, pressing this cold, lifeless little body into my arms. The reality was I had never seen a dead body before, let alone held one. I had never led a funeral before, let alone sat with two grieving parents just hours after the death of their child. ‘Pray?’ I remember thinking to myself, in panic: ‘Pray?’

Death is always intrusive. Whether it comes at such an early stage or much later in life, our experience of it is most commonly of an intrusive and unforgiving presence. At one moment life is there; at the next it is gone. Over. Whether we're greeted on the telephone with unexpected news, or have sat by the bedside of imminent death for weeks on end, when it finally comes death is always intrusive.

It is death's intrusiveness that calls our faith to account. For whenever and however it comes, death pushes in upon the very things we have come to hold dear in our faith, things like love and grace, beauty and goodness, abundant life and joy. When death intrudes with all its force and sorrow, it's as though all we believed in shaken to its core. When we stand at a graveside and watch as a coffin descends into a muddy grave, the finality is almost shocking. A rational faith perspective may be that death comes to all of us; death is a part of life and simply is. God as the great eternal presence stands in contrast to our transience. Such is life, so suck it up and be glad for what you have.

But in the midst of experiences of loss, such perspectives offer little comfort. The grief is overwhelming, the sadness so deep it can make us physically ill. We weep, we rage, we question, we despair. Death intrudes so rudely, so relentlessly, we can hardly bear it.

So what difference does faith make when death intrudes?

Since that first encounter with a dead child some 25 years ago, I have sat with many people through experiences of death, with those anticipating their own or grieving the loss of one they love. There are two images or pictures of faith that are commonly named as sustaining by those facing death. I share those with you today.

The first is of a hand, a comforting, sustaining hand that holds our own through the desolations of death. Psalm 23, a psalm commonly read at gravesides, includes the

words of verse 4, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” These words are experienced by many as a promise of God’s presence, of a God who holds the hand of one who faces their darkest hour. It is not the promise of God that the darkest valley will be eradicated, leveled or miraculously re-lit, but that as we walk through the darkness, God is present, holding our hand in his own. What’s more it is the hand of a God who knows death intimately. As the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann so provocatively reminds us, we worship ‘the crucified God’, the one whose hands bear the marks of death. The hand that holds our own is the hand of one who understands desolation in its most debilitating form.

This past week I received a letter from a friend whose daughter, the same age as my own, is in her final days. Cancer is riddled through her body and every organ is now shutting down. My friend expressed her own desolation, anger and confusion. Yet, still she wrote, ‘Every time I hold Bethy’s hand, I feel as though I am holding the hand of God.’

The second image is that of light. It is an image of hope, no matter how faint the pinhole of light may be. In Psalm 116.3 the psalmist tells of his own demise and desolation: *“The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me. I suffered distress and anguish.”* Yet later in verse 8, he names the basis of his hope: *“For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”* Our Christian faith reminds us that even in the midst of death and desolation, hope remains no matter how faint it seems. The Crucified God who holds our hand never ceases to be the God of resurrection and life. The coffin may descend, but life remains the gift of God into eternity. The words of the Psalmist anticipate those of St John in the final book of Revelation: “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

It is these images of *hand* and *light* that faith can hold for us when death intrudes. The image of God's presence in the midst of darkness—'never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'—and the image of sustaining hope we have in God, the promise of ultimate peace.

Earlier this year I read to you some words from Michael Quoist's book, *Prayers for Life*. In the week following, a member of the congregation handed me words his late wife had hand written on the inside cover of her copy of the same book. She wrote them there in the days just prior to her own death.

### **He Leadeth Me**

In pastures green? No, not always,  
Sometimes he who knoweth best  
In kindness leadeth me in weary ways  
Where heavy shadows be,  
Out of the sunshine warm, soft and bright,  
Out of the sunshine into darkest night.  
I oft would yield to sorrow and to fright  
Only for this, I know he holds my hand.  
So whether led in green or desert land  
I trust, although I cannot understand.

So whether on hilltops, high and fair  
I dwell, or in the sunless valleys, where  
The shadows be—what matters? He is there.  
And more than this; where'er the pathways lead  
He gives me no helpless, broken reed,  
But his own hand, sufficient for my need.  
So where he leads me I can safely go  
And in the blest hereafter I shall know  
Why in his wisdom he had led me so.

Amen.