

ST. ANDREW'S LEAFLETS

No. 11



DEALING WITH THE DEATH OF ONE WE LOVE

When we lose a cherished person from our lives such as a life partner, a parent or a child, we expect that we will be lonely for that person. The person is irreplaceable, we will see them no more in this life. This loneliness for a particular person, although difficult, is understandable to us. People around us expect us to be sad at the absence of the beloved. We say that we 'miss' the person; our life lacks them and the unique functions he or she played in our lives.

Such a loss brings with it the loss of part of our own identity. Each person who loves us does so in a particular way. They cherish particular aspects of our personalities, our talents, our way of being in the world. Our relationship with them may bring out qualities in ourselves that we had not suspected. When we lose that person, we lose being seen and heard in that unique way. A part of our personal history is ended. Of course we can remember how we were within that relationship, but our sense of the relationship cannot supply for the mirror the other person held up to us.

Loneliness resulting from the loss of a person is variable. As time passes, we change from a daily preoccupation with our loss to a more cyclical sadness around the places in which the cherished person would have been most active in our lives.

LONELINESS AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The loss of a dear person intimately affects our relationship with God. Remembering a deceased person can bring memories of prayers for healing that were 'not heard'. We can't deny that God has 'taken' someone from us, and there is sorrowful mystery in that action. And, possibly, anger.

The person may have imaged God to us in a unique way. We may have learned about God's kindness, God's compassion, or God's patience in a new and deeper way through our relationship. We may be aware of increased gratitude around the treasure that was granted to us. We may even have prayed for an end to our dear one's suffering and are grateful that such a prayer was heard. These thoughts and prayers coexist with our loneliness in a confusing way.

The burial ritual in the Roman Catholic Church says 'we do not mourn as those who have no hope' in an effort to awaken in us the certainty in faith that we will meet the loved one again in the next life. While the funeral is probably too early to penetrate the grief we feel, such a sentiment remains in the background of our grieving and loneliness.

However, as time passes, in a process described by C. S. Lewis (after the death of his wife) in *A Grief Observed* we become aware that the relationship with the beloved is changed and perhaps even heightened by the process of death. Our loved one still exists, but in a different state. The different state is not one in which we cannot contact the beloved. Rather it requires of us that we become sensitive to our loved one's new life. As Lewis says 'I will turn to her as often as possible in gladness. I will even salute her with a laugh. The less I mourn her, the nearer I seem to her.' Mourning lessens, but loneliness may intensify as a person turns to a life without the beloved. Who will we talk with? Who will accompany us? Who will know us in our uniqueness? These questions create in us an openness, a space for exploration. The person who walks the Christian spiritual path may create new understandings of what Christ can mean to them. New realizations of being known by God may develop.

None of this is to imply that the truly spiritual person simply replaces the loved one with Christ or God and thereby 'solves' the problem of human loneliness. However, loneliness can act a catalyst to explore a renewed awareness of the life within us.

(Anne Marie Lee)