

Practical and pastoral support for bereaved families

Thank you, Anne, for inviting me today and thank you, Canon Andrew, for your hospitality. It is a huge privilege to be with you, dear people, as you explore parental grief and how you can best support bereaved parents through prayer, liturgy and in other ways.

Your ministry is holy work. Intercessory prayer, pleading with God on behalf of others, is urgently needed today. Prayer is like incense, rising straight upwards to Almighty God, and powerful. In the words of St. James, 'Pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much'.

To pray for and comfort the bereaved is *imitatio Dei* indeed, for God Himself comforts mourners. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted'.

That verse I only truly understood when in 2002 my husband and I were suddenly bereaved of our elder son. Joshua was a healthy, happy undergraduate aged twenty. His heart simply stopped early on the Sunday morning before Christmas. I found his body still warm, half-smiling, his eyes serenely gazing upwards as though he had just said, 'Hineini – here am I!' to the Angel of Death.

The shock, the anguish and grief, were unimaginable. Yet even in those first days there was comfort. The Jewish community cocooned me with their presence from morning until late at night – I sat shiva for the formal seven days, but for a whole thirty days I was not left alone. 140 Jews visited us during that time. Food was brought continually, people wept with us, they listened, they hugged us, they laughed with us if we spoke of how funny Joshua had been. Jews visiting the homes of mourners know they must keep silence until the mourner speaks – and then respond to whatever they say, even if it is bitter anger or a jolly memory. Our Christian friends wrote letters,

sent flowers and cards, paid for Masses to be said in Joshua's memory, but few actually came.

One visit, though, was life-changing. Eighteen months previously, Joshua's dear friend, Sebastian, died by suicide aged eighteen. I had not met Sebastian or his family. But soon after Joshua died, Sebastian's bereaved mother, a prayerful Christian, arrived on our doorstep to befriend me – and we are still close friends to this day. Anna told me that she had learnt that one must *run towards* bereaved parents. I found her presence so comforting that I knew that I, too, must in time run towards other bereaved mothers.

So when, three months later, a colleague of my surgeon husband phoned asking to befriend his secretary, a bereaved single mother whose daughter Zoe had died in her first term at university, I immediately said yes. Dorothy-Anne came and wept for four hours. Zoe had been her only child, deeply loved, and had either been murdered or taken her own life. Dorothy-Anne was beside herself with grief and anger. As I listened and wept with her, I realised that having been comforted by others, I could now offer comfort to Dorothy-Anne. My grief for Joshua was the Open Sesame, allowing her to share her grief. I spent much time with her and remained close friends until her eventual death.

But I am not here to share my personal story – you have heard the far more eloquent and moving words of Father Paul Jones. I want to share a few insights gleaned from having spent time with many hundreds of bereaved parents since Joshua's death and being the full-time Chair/CEO of the bereavement charity The Compassionate Friends – TCF - for three years.

Each son or daughter is unique and lives and dies in unique circumstances. Each mother's and father's grief, too, is unique to them. So please bear in mind that, while whatever I say today is true, some of what I say will not apply to every single bereaved parent.

To lose a son or daughter is perhaps the worst loss. We know this from the Bible: Jeremiah 31,15: 'A voice was heard in Ramah,

lamentation and weeping: Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not'. When Jacob was told of Joseph's death by the brothers who had sold him into slavery, Jacob 'rent his clothes and put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days... he refused to be comforted and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him'' (Genesis 37, 34-35).

King David was a bereaved father. When Absalom, his rebellious son, died, David was heartbroken. He wept and mourned and cried, "O my son Absalom, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, o Absalom, my son, my son!" David covered his face, a sign of wanting to die. When his friend Jonathan had been killed, David wrote glorious poetry lamenting Jonathan's death. When his son died, he wrote nothing. For there are no words which can truly express a bereaved parent's grief. Even statues of the Pieta, the Virgin Mary cradling Christ, a grieving mother cradling her dead son, cannot convey such agony.

Grief is the price of love. A parent's love never dies. And so the grief of a loving mother or father bereft of their child is devastating. It is sharp and intense, like a jagged flint within the body which causes unbearable internal pain. Bereaved mothers have told me 'My heart was seared in two'... 'my heart was being ripped to shreds'. Many newly bereaved parents feel they are going mad with grief. Most have suicidal thoughts. It is normal to want to die, and tragically a few cannot bear to go on living and do take their own lives. One *can* indeed die of a broken heart.

In my childhood, bereaved people wore black armbands, and sometimes black clothes. Today, nothing distinguishes mourners from others. That can be hard. One can be inwardly screaming, or suddenly in floods of tears, and no one will understand why. Unlike widows and widowers, there is no word to describe bereaved parents.

I mentioned silent screaming. But many newly bereaved mothers go out in their car in order to be able to howl, to scream loudly in the agony of their loss.

Bereaved parents are like amputees; the presence of our treasured son or daughter has been torn away, their unique irreplaceable life has been extinguished, part of ourselves has died with them. We learn slowly to live without them, but we always limp a little.

I used to be rather shocked that Jews are expected to mourn eleven months for their father or mother, but only a month for their child. But as soon as Joshua died I realised why. For the mourning month I kept to the Jewish rituals of grief; a memorial candle shone night and day, I wore no make-up or new clothes, listened to no music, But how relieved I was that after that month I could pick up those small delights of normality, for I knew that I would mourn Joshua for the rest of my life.

Commonly, family and friends cannot understand parental anguish. They want and expect them to 'get over it' as soon as possible, within a year at most. But we cannot 'get over it'. We get through somehow, with help, but carry the grief hidden within us all our lives. Grief never fully disappears. We grow scar tissue round it. Grief remains within us, at first agonising, then gradually smoother and more bearable with time but always a part of who we are. Grief lies in wait. It can emerge with full force, triggered by a song, a sudden memory, a glimpsed face, empathy with the suffering of others, or a new loss. Never be surprised if a bereaved parent suddenly weeps uncontrollably or looks distraught or walks away – grief can well up at any time. The poet Elizabeth Jennings, wrote:

“Grief can return without warning...

...Time does not heal,

It makes a half-stitched scar

That can be broken and again you feel

Grief as total as in its first hour’.

After Joshua died suddenly in his sleep, from SADS, Sudden Adult Death Disorder, I had endless flashbacks of finding him dead in bed. I yearned for Joshua, my mind constantly searched for him, my whole body ached and my heart literally hurt. Ambulance sirens triggered dread. I wanted to die and I had extreme insomnia. I later realised that these are all normal reactions to intense grief. Perhaps they are what Shakespeare, who lost his only son, Hamnet, aged six, expressed as ‘shadows’: *“Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows”*. But my reactions were also signs of PTSD, Post - Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Especially if a son’s or daughter’s death is sudden or traumatic, violent or complex, as in suicide, PTSD can be massive. Parents commonly have flashbacks of when the catastrophe happened - the moment they found their child’s body or the police knocked on their door or when they had to turn off the life support machine. They often experience insomnia, loss of appetite, huge mood swings, hyperarousal, sudden terror, extreme restlessness, numbness or many other symptoms of PTSD.

Our world has suddenly been turned upside down. The sense of disorientation, of living in a nightmare, can be overpowering. One couple I know could not leave their house for years, except to buy food. One mother could not bear to be in her house in the early months, as everything in it reminded her of her dead son. Some have to move house.

As you care passionately about praying for or supporting bereaved parents, please remember that many have huge stresses in addition to their grief. My husband and I were relatively fortunate – Joshua died asleep, which Jews call ‘mitat Ha-Shem’ the kiss of God’. But some parents have nursed their children through sudden or terminal illness and seen their children suffer pain and distress. Many have had to cope with their child’s major mental health issues – bulimia, being bi-polar, massive autism, or cannabis-induced psychosis – with very little support. Many face difficult inquests, which they dread – especially if their child died by murder or suicide.

Some endure terrible press intrusion and publicity. If sons or daughters have died abroad, for example on their gap year, there can be immense difficulties and expense in repatriating their bodies. They often never learn how their child actually died.

Parents who lose their only child, or both their children often face a bleak future without the joy of grandchildren. Parents whose son or daughter died leaving children sometimes lose all contact with their grandchildren, when the spouse remarries. Absence of grandchildren is a bitter loss.

Suicide brings especially difficult consequences. By the way, in bereavement charities we *never* talk about ‘committing suicide’ with its connotation of crime, but about dying by suicide or taking one’s own life – though that phrase, too, is problematic. Ever younger children are dying by suicide. Before Covid I held annual day-long social gatherings at home for several dozen bereaved parents. At one several years ago, four couples had lost children aged ten to fourteen to suicide – mainly due to cyber-bullying. They were relieved to meet one another - and from that day was born an annual TCF retreat specifically for parents bereaved through suicide.

Nearly all bereaved parents of older children experience remorse, for no parent is perfect. Many experience intense anger, often justified: anger at police, if community officers sent to inform them of their child’s death were insensitive; anger at the NHS, if their child was let down by doctors or inadequate mental health services. There can be anger against God for taking their child, and against family members or friends for failing to support them or for saying the wrong thing – this anger can often cause further rupture and isolation. Following a child’s death, some parents are gradually abandoned by family and friends. Within TCF, people often say ‘My address book has changed’. Many parents see a friend crossing the road in order to avoid them. Some bereaved mothers and fathers become deeply isolated in their grief. Their enduring PTSD can be one cause, as people around them simply cannot understand the devastating consequences of extreme grief.

This is why I have become a passionate believer in the value of peer group support for bereaved parents. For we become an extended family, able to understand one another and to offer invaluable friendship. In local monthly meetings for bereaved parents run by The Compassionate Friends, I have repeatedly seen little miracles happen. Often a newly bereaved mother arrives silent, weeping or numb, unable to speak, and may come month after month speechless and grief-stricken. Suddenly she will be touched by another mother's story of loss and reach forward to hug her or find an unexpected word of comfort. From that moment onwards, from sudden empathy with another's anguish, a gradual process of growing through grief begins. The biblical book of Job pivots on such a turning point: Job 42, 10: 'The Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends'.

Let me tell you briefly about The Compassionate Friends or TCF. For you in the Guild of All Souls are somehow like mediaeval hermits. Hermits often dwelt at isolated crossroads or on forest paths or on bridges, so that they could pray for wayfarers and point them in the right direction. When you encounter bereaved parents, you will pray tenderly *for* them, and sometimes *with* them – and you may need to point them in a good direction towards sources of help. The Compassionate Friends – TCF - is one of several such sources. For parents who have lost very young children, there is SANDS and the Lullaby Trust. Children's hospices have excellent peer support groups, and so too do SOBS (Survivors of Bereavement Through Suicide). There are several specialised Helplines such as that run by Great Ormond Street Hospital and Drugfam.

TCF is a national charity founded in 1969 by two bereaved couples brought together by a compassionate young Anglican hospital chaplain, now Canon Dr. Simon Stephens OBE. TCF spread to several other countries and is very active in the USA and Canada, Australia, South Africa, Germany and elsewhere. TCF UK provides trained peer support through several dozen local monthly groups, a Helpline open every day of the year, a free lending library of books

on bereavement, and several annual retreats and gatherings. During the pandemic we developed excellent on-line Zoom support, which will continue alongside our face-to-face meetings.

We hold specialised TCF retreats: for the newly bereaved; for parents bereaved through suicide; for parents bereaved through alcohol or substance use; for parents with no surviving children; and for bereaved siblings. All are run entirely by well-trained volunteers who are themselves bereaved parents or siblings. All retreats have special sessions for fathers and to discuss difficult issues.

TCF publishes over forty free leaflets about different aspects of parental loss, all written by bereaved parents. Copies are over there and can all be downloaded from the TCF website. Our Grief Companions scheme puts a newly bereaved parent in touch with a similarly bereaved volunteer, who will regularly support them by phone or personal meetings. Informal social gatherings, which often appeal especially to fathers, include regular London walks led by a bereaved father joined by thirty or forty bereaved parents each time, and walks in several beauty spots in England and Wales.

Hugging bereaved parents is important. We all miss that warm embracing hug from our dead son or daughter, and some parents become cut off from all human contact. So it comes quite naturally for us to hug one another when we meet. Here is a quote from Leo Buscaglia, an American academic who, following the tragic suicide of one of his best students, began teaching about love, kindness and the importance of hugging: *'Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around'*.

For parents bereft of their child, accompaniment, companionship in grief, is essential. Many suffer inner torment, plagued by incessant questions of 'Why', 'What if' and 'If only...'. Most feel alone and lonely. Bereft mothers and fathers need to be given acceptance, hope, encouragement, gentle words, above all –

patient intent listening. You will all have learnt the art of listening to one another, listening to the sick and the dying, listening to God. That silence in which one's own words are stilled, silence in which one hearkens solely to the voice of the Other – that silent listening is desperately needed by bereaved parents. I was privileged to be friends with the great humanitarian Helen Bamber who, aged nineteen, went from London to post-war Belsen to support the dying. She later founded the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture – now called Freedom from Torture. She spoke of intent listening to suffering men and women as '*divine attentiveness*'.

Job's comforters sat with him for seven days in silence, comforting him with their presence. Only when they began to speak did they fail. Words often wound bereaved parents. Well-intentioned people often try to bring comfort by uttering platitudes and banalities: 'God takes those young whom he specially loves'; 'Time is a great healer'; 'At least you still have another child'; 'I know just how you feel'; 'Some people have it worse'; 'I feel your pain'; 'Count your blessings'; 'Be strong for your children'; 'How is everything?'; 'You are looking better today'. Even devout Christians can get it wrong. When a dear Christian friend visited me for the first time after Joshua died, she told me about how close to God she had felt when her newborn baby had died of a massive deformity. I felt like strangling her. I wanted her to share some of the lovely things she remembered about Joshua as a boy, but, alas, she didn't.

I know a bereaved mother whose only child, a post-graduate son, had just been accepted for ordination but died of sudden catastrophic illness. Only six weeks after her beloved son's death, the priest of her regular Anglican church chided her for still grieving. 'Surely, he said, 'you should be rejoicing that your son is now in glory'. She and her husband never went to that church again.

The traditional Jewish phrases said to mourners, 'I wish you long life', 'May God comfort you together with all other mourners', and 'May his memory be for a blessing', provide a gentle reminder of life and that mourners are part of a wider community.

More generally, the phrase that helps all bereaved parents the most is the sentence which anyone can say: 'Tell me what your child was really like'. Allowing the parent to talk about their dead son or daughter, to relive – again and again - how they died, to remember aspects of their unique personality and character, is one of the greatest gifts you can give to a bereaved parent. Importantly, it helps them to accept that their child really has died. Naming the precious dead daughter or son, hearing and remembering how they lived – this is a crucial aspect of supporting bereaved parents.

So, too, is realising that many bereaved parents have endured huge suffering *before* the catastrophe of death. To watch one's child suffering or in pain is like torture. One friend, a devout Anglican and daughter of a bishop, had to cope with the anguish of her beloved daughter's drug addiction for years before the eventual deadly overdose. I recently met a newly bereaved mother whose healthy teenage son fell suddenly ill, was in a coma for months, survived but was permanently changed, brain-damaged. She spent eight months in hospital with him, then cared for him at home for several years night and day, until he had a sudden brain haemorrhage and died. This brave grieving mother now worries about her younger son, now a withdrawn teenager, a bereaved sibling whose young life has been devastated by his older brother's brain damage and death.

Covid has brought extra burdens. During lockdowns, parents may not have been able to visit their sons or daughters in hospital. They will not have had the comfort of large funerals and face-to-face contact with their own friends or their son's or daughter's friends.

Bereaved parents need to be coaxed back into life. They have encountered death at close quarters and dwelt for weeks and months in death's all-consuming shadow. Self-neglect is common. In the first weeks they need to be tempted to eat. The Jewish community understands this well. In the first two days Jews bring delicious soups, and then gradually smoked salmon and delicacies, and cooked meals for the entire week of mourning. My husband and I have never eaten as well as during the month after Joshua died, as platters and

casseroles and dishes arrived on our doorstep. The biblical command to 'Choose Life', not death, is hard for bereaved parents, who will need constant encouragement and cocooning in the early weeks and months.

Many bereaved parents become financially poorer following the death of their child. Some are forced into debt in order to pay for the unexpected funeral. Quite a large number find that they cannot work again, either because they suffer acute anxiety, PTSD and depression, or because their work triggers too many memories. One headmaster, whose son had attended his school and had died by suicide, resigned, as the school held too many memories of his son. I know several mothers who were schoolteachers or teaching assistants, who can no longer work for the same reason. In Australia a detailed study of a large cohort of bereaved parents found that on average they were 35% poorer after they were bereaved. TCF gives a generous number of bursaries to enable hard-up parents to attend our retreats. Reading the letters from those applying for the bursaries is harrowing.

Many bereaved parents have deep worry about their surviving children, who are all bereaved siblings. Sometimes parents become withdrawn from them, as they focus inevitably on grieving for the dead child. Occasionally siblings try to deaden their grief through alcohol or substances. Most bereaved siblings are vulnerable to depression and other mental health problems. Today it is virtually impossible to get support from the Child and Mental Health Service (CAMS) until a child has actually attempted suicide. There are excellent charities such as Child Bereavement UK, Grief Encounter and Winston's Wish which do offer counselling to bereaved children and teenagers. For older siblings TCF offers on-line peer support and retreats,

Bereaved parents need to be reassured that their sorrow will not always be this dark, that they will one day again find meaning, hope, joy and purpose in life.

Grief can be transcended. When Joshua died, a rabbi visiting us said, 'You will be able to do great things in your son's memory for the whole of your life'. If bereaved parents are well-supported by family, friends, community, church or a body like TCF, then they can and do eventually achieve miracles in their son's or daughter's name. Many devote themselves to raising money for charities reflecting the illness or difficulty faced by their child, or for a hospice, or to help other young people and children. One could write a long book about the extraordinary charities and fundraising initiatives undertaken by bereaved parents in their child's name. Ameca Hospitals in Malawi in the name of Alex; Sebastian Hunter schools for untouchables, orphans and lepers in India; Guy's Trust community centres in Nepal: are just some of the exceptional projects undertaken by bereaved parents whom I know.

The majority of parents in TCF will say that they have become better people since the death of their child. They are kinder, have greater empathy, are more warm-hearted, have the gift of tears. Here, too, there is biblical example. After Absalom's death, David, too, was a better man and king. He first made peace with his estranged people, saying 'You are my brethren, you are my bones and flesh'. Then he dramatically showed mercy, forgiving his penitent enemy, Shimei – and then showed immense kindness to Mephibosheth, son of his dead enemy, Saul.

Anne will talk about liturgies for the bereaved this afternoon. There is a wonderful Jewish prayer, the *kaddish*, the *Sanctification*, recited by the entire congregation at all synagogue services, and, above all, by mourners daily for the year following their bereavement. At key moments in the synagogue service, only the mourners say this prayer. As a result, everyone knows who is mourning and will approach them after the service to offer words of comfort. Many Jews know the *kaddish* by heart in Hebrew: *Yitgadal ve yitkadash shme*

raba...In my experience, this prayer of glorious praise and adulation of God, uttered by mourners with congregational responses, really does bring strength and hope. Death can detach one - detach one from others, from reality, from God. The *kaddish* prayer attaches one closely, both to God and to one's fellow congregants.

May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will. May his Kingship be established in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire household of Israel, swiftly and in the near future; and say, Amen. May his great name be blessed, forever and ever. Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored, elevated and lauded be the Name of the holy one, Blessed is he – above and beyond any blessings and hymns, Praises and consolations which are uttered in the world; and say Amen. May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who makes peace in his high holy places, may he bring peace upon us, and upon all Israel; and say Amen.

Here are a few practical tips on supporting bereaved parents.

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Visit as early as possible and accept them as they are. Take a little food if you can. Cocoon them as much as possible, in practical ways and by your presence. They need a protective cocoon in which to grow into the new changed person they will become.

Don't judge them in any way. Try to understand, if they express a superstitious pleasure in seeing a white feather or a butterfly -such

things are meaningful to many. But do try to steer bereaved parents away if they are attracted to seances or spiritualism, which are deceptive and can be hugely damaging.

Be as well-resourced as you can. Do please look at our TCF website. Everything we offer is free. Gather resources together in your home or church – leaflets from TCF and other bereavement charities and perhaps a small library of books on bereavement, such as Maurice Lamm's *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey beyond Grief* and books on listening, such as Kathryn Mannix's *Listen: How to find the Words for Tender Conversations*. The TCF lending library can send you or a bereaved parent books on almost any aspect of parental or sibling grief.

Many churches nowadays have a committee for visiting the bereaved. If yours doesn't, then perhaps consider creating one.

Home hospitality is vitally important. Encourage church members to invite bereaved people to their homes for coffee or a meal – and if the invitation is refused, to repeat the invitation again and again.

As you pray for a particular person, you may well get a sudden flash of inspiration – the thought of inviting them for a walk, or a word of encouragement, or a helpful metaphor, such as cobweb - the strongest thread for its size - Romanies bind fresh cobweb on wounds to heal them. Threads of friendship are like cobweb gossamer - invisible, strong, and healing.

Encourage bereaved mothers and fathers to talk about their child, about their death and about their life.

Introduce bereaved parents to one another.

A broken heart never fully mends. But there is nothing so whole as a broken heart. For a broken heart expands – and can create miracles. Here is a Jewish story:

‘A messenger comes to the mourner’s house. “Come”, says the messenger, “you are needed”.

“I cannot come”, says the mourner, “my spirit is broken”.

“That is why you are needed”, says the messenger.’

A broken heart and spirit can achieve miracles. I know so many heroic broken-hearted, openhearted bereaved parents, who have reached out to others and created miracles of love in the name of their dead child, so dearly remembered and still so passionately loved.

Mourning parents need to be needed. Mourning parents need you – your prayers, your food, your silent presence, your intent listening and your gentle words of encouragement. As you uphold mourners, you are doing God’s work: Psalm 54, ‘God is mine helper: the Lord is with them that uphold my soul’. Bless you, wonderful people, for so lovingly helping God to help the bereaved..