

ADDRESS FOR THE MEMORIAL SERVICE **1st SEPTEMBER 2013**

Reading:

“ I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 29: 11-14)

You'll probably have found that some people didn't know how to treat you when your relative died: whether to speak about it or avoid it. Some people feel they should talk softly and avoid any laughter when they're with you, and some are so embarrassed that they'll keep away from you altogether as if you're infectious. And it's all too easy for people to offer false comfort to try to cheer you up: “Everything will be OK”; “It's for the best, you know”; “At least she's out of pain” (which may be true, but doesn't help you!) People want to try to heal your pain, to sort it out, tie up the loose ends and move you on. But grief doesn't work like that, does it? And things people say may cheer you up for a moment but do nothing when you're on your own listening to the silence. My mother said that when my father died, she didn't feel lonely, just completely alone.

Very often when I'm on my way to take a funeral, I find myself asking, “What can I offer these people at the funeral? And am I just going through the motions, saying nice words? Is what I say real; is it true, and am I testing it out and finding it to be true?” Because if it's not the truth, it's again false comfort, and I'm not just deceiving other

people but deceiving myself too.

Certainly, God doesn't pretend to offer quick fire, easy comfort: "Cheer up; I'm here. Smile, God loves you. Live as you want and I'll be with you!" God says that sometimes living is awful, and it's all we can do just to keep plodding on or to keep ourselves afloat when we feel we're sinking. Sometimes we bring this hell on ourselves and sometimes it just seems to hit us out of the blue, and we don't understand what's going on.

In that Bible reading God's people are going through an awful time too - and they're not just any people, but God's own people at that time. It's awful because their country's been destroyed, like Syria today, people killed, others taken as slaves to Babylon. God had failed them they probably felt. And for his part, God felt that his people had failed Him, by paying Him lip service but really ignoring Him. And yet in this reading God says to them, "You can start again. I will get you out of this hell if you let me. It will take time [70 years for the Israelites!]. Stop playing around with me and call to me; come, pray to me, look for me properly. Test me out properly. Let me take charge of you because I have plans for you, not to harm you, but to give you hope and a future."

Hang on to the words in that reading. God did bring his people back from exile at that time and give them hope and a future. I'm trying not to give you soothing words but something to hang on to, someone to hang on to, and who is with you even when you are alone. Certainly, I've found it to be true, particularly in some rough times I've been through. I've had to come back to God if I've begun to push Him out of my life, and the first time I turned to Him, I said to Him, "God, if you're there, DO something because I'm desperate. I don't believe you are there, but I've got nothing to lose." That was nearly 40 years ago. I've found that it is true and it works.

Is it easy? No. Sometimes when you're at the bottom in despair, it's easier to stay at the bottom because then you can't fall any further. Or else you perhaps feel you've heard it all before about God caring for you. So had the people in that Bible reading: they'd heard it all before and it had gone in one ear and out the other. But now as they slogged away as slaves, they really called to God. Let's do that too and see what He does!

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