

Eugene Novitsky
describes what Ukrainian
parents learned from
their sick child

A gift from CHERNOBYL?

We listen to the oncologist's verdict. 'Blood cancer - leukaemia.' Immediately we grasp the implications. Eight to nine months' treatment...mother to stay in hospital, too...chemotherapy...radiation...75% survival. Why, Lord, why *our* child? Is this punishment? And if so, do we deserve it? Yet we believe the statement of Jesus (Luke 13:1-5) that suffering and death are not necessarily forms of punishment. So what is the origin of this sickness?

The simple answer is that it has come from the Chernobyl isotopes spread around the Ukraine, from the sin of a carelessly designed power station, from the 'progress' that is destroying the world. Yet surely it would not have been a problem for the Almighty to spare *our* child from this horror? Then we recall that God shares the pain with us, that Christ's death answers the question 'Why?' and that his cross and resurrection lead us to salvation and newness of life. It was our eight-year-old son who, bald and exhausted after two months of chemotherapy, said that perhaps his illness was not a punishment, but a *gift*.

In our motherland, where atheism was god for so long, a dying person is not told the truth. As Christian parents, we wanted to be truthful. Honesty, being the pledge of love, will bring trustful security. Hope and faith never grow from a lie, yet here was our child exercising both as he shared with us the amazing truth that, despite appearances, God still had something good to give us. There was no more room for doubt as we received this insight. By our staying close together, through pain and victory alike, we would

mirror God's own unfailing love, even in the darkness of the abyss.

On this hospital ward, our eyes can see God more clearly than in the busyness of everyday life, but here he is not so much on a heavenly throne as on the cross. We are isolated, fighting cancer of the blood, and we are left facing our Saviour. Even despairing parents who do not know Christ have suddenly sensed his presence. For the first time, some are overwhelmed with the need to cleanse their hearts before him.

Young children do not see death as final, but often view it as a door into another world. On a cancer ward, more of them are familiar with blood than the rest of us and some can grasp that Christ's blood was shed to give us life. As we trust him he saves us from eternal death and keeps us safe forever. Some are able to speak to their families about this assurance. Thus, eleven-year-old Natasha was first in her family to find Christ, her mother then finding him whilst staying with her daughter in the hospital. The young girl's initial dreams of recovery changed to awareness that she was dying, so she told her mother to stand firm and to pray for her father. He came to faith after Natasha's death.

Help us, Lord, to learn from our children. Through their sickness, their fragile lives and even through their dying, they teach us, support us, comfort us and bring us to Christ, through whom the gift of God is eternal life (Romans 6:23). What a priceless love-gift to find, hidden on a cancer ward. Our little boy was right.

Adapted from a paper by Eugene Novitsky who heads a support agency for children with cancer in Simferopol, Ukraine