

John Wyatt relates his experience of caring for a relative with dementia

CARING IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY

key points

- For those with no faith, caring for people with respect seems largely an exercise in nostalgia, remembering how they were.
- Christians can care for people with dignity, respect and love because of the wonderful Christ-like person they may become in the new creation.
- In Jesus' resurrection body we catch the first glimpse of the new humanity; physical, but perfected and glorious.

To begin with, the changes were subtle. Unexplained anxiety and tearfulness, episodes of uncharacteristic blankness, irritation and anger with medics and their pointless tests. As the dementing process continued, my mother tragically changed and aged before our eyes. Her confusion increased, she was frequently distressed by terrifying visual hallucinations. Her limbs became permanently flexed and distorted. Visiting her on the acute psychogeriatric ward, I remember being overwhelmed by grief at her obvious distress and fear. I wept in the consultant's office, powerless to do anything to alleviate my mother's anguish.

Thankfully that dreadful period passed. Quetiapine had a remarkable effect in improving the psychotic symptoms, and compassionate and skilled nursing and medical care transformed my mother's condition. She became peaceful and relaxed. Although she could not communicate, she enjoyed holding hands with my father, listening to music, sometimes even singing along, especially to old hymns from her childhood in the Christian Brethren.

My father was tireless in visiting her, spending hours every day at her bedside. It was very important to him that the staff knew about her past, knew the sort of person Grace used to be. He put photographs on the wall – this is what she used to be. Grace with her children, Grace at the nursery school she pioneered, Grace laughing delightedly with a little child.

We all understood why this was so important to him. It mattered that the staff treated her with respect and dignity, because of who she really was. She was so much more than this little aged, distorted, pathetic being appeared to be.

From a secular perspective, when caring for an elderly person ravaged by disease and disability, this backward-looking perspective is the best you can get. Yes, this being in the bed seems pathetic and pitiable. But that is not the whole story. They were remarkable, once. They were strong and active, once. They used to be beautiful. For those with no faith, caring for people with respect seems largely an exercise in nostalgia.

But as our family spent time with my mother we were sometimes reminded that this was not the end of the story. As the family met at her bedside, in those occasional but special times of prayer and singing, although my mother could not speak and sometimes did not even recognise us, we knew that we shared in the Christian hope. This was not the end of the story. By God's grace we would meet again. And so we had to care for her now, not only because of who she was, but also in the light of the wonderful person she was going to be.

'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.' (1 Corinthians 13:13).

In the great hymn of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul places Christian love together with faith and hope. They are three virtues which all point to the future. To use theological jargon, they are eschatological virtues; pointing towards the end times.

When we love someone who is desperately affected by disease, by a degenerative condition, by disability – the malformed baby, the person in a persistent vegetative state, the profoundly demented individual, the destitute homeless heroin addict – when we care for them with dignity, respect and love, we are saying that these are the sort of people who may, in God's grace, be transformed and enter into the new creation. We treat these individuals with respect because of the wonderful Christ-like person they may become in the future. We are saying that this is not the end of the story – there is more going on here than meets the eye. This is just the end of the beginning.

Of course we may not know whether this particular individual is dying in the Christian hope, whether they will be raised to new life or tragically to a second death. And it is not for us to decide which category this person comes into. But this does not change the way we care for them. We treat each person in the light of the new creation, in the light of what by God's grace they could become.

God's strange and wonderful creation plan was to take his amazing image and to place it in a pathetic, weak, vulnerable and fragile carbon-based life form. It was a strange and risky enterprise to make mysterious God-like beings out of the dust of the earth. And if you look at the history of mankind it seems very much like the plan has gone hopelessly wrong. There is so much evil, so much pain, so much distress, so much disease. Surely the best thing to do is to wipe the slate clean and start again? Humanity needs to be wiped out of cosmic history and there needs to be a fresh beginning.

But then Jesus, the second Adam, is born, he lives and dies and is risen from the dead. The risen Jesus is a physical, recognisable, touchable human being. His risen body isn't utterly alien and different, a completely new kind of reality. It's the same as before, but different. He is Adam all over again, but different.

The Creator God takes on a human body made, like all other bodies, from the dust of the ground. God in the form of Jesus takes up the dust he has made and incorporates it into his own body. And after death on the cross, he is raised as a physical, touchable, recognisable human being who goes out of his way to demonstrate his physical reality to his bewildered disciples.

The Gospel writers go to great lengths to emphasise the physical reality of Christ's restored body and its continuity with his old physical body. The writers are all adamant; the grave is empty. The molecules of which Christ's body were composed are no longer buried in a part of the ground in Palestine. The risen Jesus eats and drinks. He breaks bread. He talks. He is touched. He is recognised by his friends. His body even bears physical scars. There is no room to doubt the physical continuity between Jesus' original body and the resurrection body. It is the same, but different. In his resurrection body we catch the first glimpse of the new humanity, of Homo Sapiens 2.0.

As Paul writes: *'Just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so we shall bear the likeness of the man from heaven'* (1 Corinthians 15:49). The image of God inherited from Adam will be fulfilled and transformed into a new and much more glorious image. Yes, we shall still be reflections, we shall still be images. We shall not lose our creaturely dependence. But we shall discover the true likeness that we were always intended to bear, the true identity that we were intended to indwell.

In the new heaven and the new earth there will be no sickness that needs healing, and no tears that need comforting. But there will be greeting and blessing, laughter and love, joy and peace. Our relationships with others will be healed and redeemed, there will be forgiveness and reconciliation.

And the Bible teaches us that this new age is already reaching backwards into our age. Our current age is being invaded backwards from the future. This new way of being has already started and our lives are being touched by the melody of heaven.

And even the hospital bed, the intensive care unit, the care home, the hospice, the place of disease and dementia and pain and dying, even those places can become invaded by a breath, a fragrance, a melody from the new creation, by the life-giving Spirit of Christ. That's why we are called to care for our patients in the light of the future. In fact Christian love can only be intelligible, can only make sense, in the light of the Christian hope.

'Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...'
(1 Corinthians 13:7)

From an earthly perspective it seems that, all too often, love does fail. You pour out your love, your care, your time and attention and then it's gone. It seems so often as though your love is thrown back in your face. To show persistent, sacrificial love to a disabled child, a violent disturbed adolescent, a chronic schizophrenic, may seem pointless, futile, and meaningless.

But the words of Paul remind us and rebuke us when we are despairing – *'Love never fails'*.

This hope, reflected in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, is that though tongues will fail, prophecies will become unnecessary and partial knowledge will become complete, those hidden acts of genuine love and compassion will somehow remain. In some mysterious way they will become part of, become incorporated into the new heaven and the new earth.

By God's grace those who were round her bedside will meet my mother again. And together we will walk and laugh and sing in the new heaven and new earth. The love poured out years ago has not been lost or forgotten.

'Love never fails'.

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