

Impossible Situations

Dementia and Death – March 20th



The role of the Anesthetist is shrouded in mystery. Most of us can't spell it, and some of us can't even say it without getting twisted teeth. If you have ever had a surgical operation, you will have placed your life in the hands of one. The Anesthetist will take you into unconsciousness, purposefully keep you there, and then bring you out of the darkness when the time is right.

I had two surgeries as a child. You may have had your own experience of waiting for the hospital porter to come and take you down. I'm sure my mother accompanied me to some kind of Anesthetist's antechamber where I was 'put under' before being wheeled into the theatre. I've accompanied Sophie to the same place on numerous occasions. Just like my mother, I was allowed to go no further. Turning back and leaving your loved one can be a very emotional point of separation.

Even if you have not had that experience, you will certainly have seen or been close to the kind of separation that comes with dementia. I'm at the point with my elderly father where I'm watching his life and personality being slowly taken down by Alzheimer's disease. The porter is wheeling him along so very slowly, and there is only so far I can go with him before I shall have to leave him and turn back. The onset of dementia seems to announce itself by reaching into the final years of life with a foreboding that makes us all aware of how it will end.

Jesus foretold of how it would all end for him too, as we know multiple times (Matthew 16:21, John 12:23). I am sure he carried that thoughts and feelings for a long time, trying to put it out of his mind. Even his disciples tried to put it off, by underplaying, rationalising, or denying. As the time of separation came nearer, Jesus knew that he would have to account for their feelings and their lack of understanding. *'I will come again to you and take you to where I am, so there you may be also'* (John 14:1-6). Their experiences of life and death would only take them so far *'Where I am going you cannot come'* (John 13:33,36).

Even as we sit and read today, there are scientists and academics beavering away in their laboratories trying to find a cure for dementia. I'm sure some of that will be achieved, but not all of it. Statisticians can tell us that lifestyle is a factor in dementia, and that therefore changing lifestyles will mean dementia keeps changing too. The links between how you live your life, and how your life will end, are poorly understood and perhaps impossible to control. Indeed, dementia is an impossible situation.

Recall the resurrection words of Jesus to St Peter, perhaps the nearest we have in scripture to the impossible realities of dementia: *'Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'* (Jn 21:18)

The fact that we live this life means that we shall inevitably die from it. To retain my current picture, the porter will come at some time and take you down too. *But it's not an impossible situation.* Considering all the subjects that Justin and I have covered in this Lent series, it turns out that death is the easiest to resolve!

As faithful Christian people, do we not know that the resurrection awaits us, like some recovery? No statistician is required to tell you that the faithful conduct of your lifestyle will give not only to your death, but also your resurrection. Christ himself has made it so and reassures us so. *'This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'* (Jn 6:40)

There have been plenty of scientific attempts to explain the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all of which major on the assertion that actually he wasn't dead at all, but rather drugged or inebriated in some way. Was Jesus given an anaesthetic? (Mt 27:34) What a load of nonsense!

There are many impossible situations in this life, created by all humanity, but death is not one of them. *'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.'* (Jn 5:24)

Rector Chris