

Dying and Rising: a Reflection

In the past week I have had the privilege to visit my friend's dying mother and subsequently celebrate her life at her funeral; and as well to witness the birth of my first grand-daughter. Both are very human experiences but they reflect so much of the Mystery central to the Christian faith: dying and rising. John O'Donohue in his book *Anam Cara: Spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world* (Ch 6) reflects on this dying and rising in depth.

He says if a fetus knew the journey ahead of it and that it could never return to where it had come from; it would think it was going to die. He also speaks of the death of a woman of faith - *a beautiful death*, he says. As death came near, she became frightened, but those around her unfolded the gift of her life through key events and memories. O'Donohue says, *Gradually, an incredible serenity and calmness came over her.... Now she was completely in rhythm with herself, attuned and completely tranquil.*

Bev was a woman of faith, a woman who knew deeply the sorrow and pain of life and yet was positively accepting of the doctor's report that there was nothing more that could be done. With the loving support of her family, friends and faith community, she too continued the process of giving herself over to the mystery of dying and rising. Like O'Donohue's faithful woman, an incredible serenity came over Bev and her dying space. Visitors to her room entered into a space where Bev was truly in rhythm with herself and completely tranquil.

That became Bev's gift to all of us who entered: we too shared at least for a time, that rhythm and that tranquillity. Looking back, that waiting time, while not without its share of pain and discomfort for Bev, and sadness for those around her, was truly a gift, reminding us all of the journey we all must make and showing us by example how to make that journey. Just as the Feast of Easter is preceded by a time of reflection and preparation, so the journey of dying and rising can be enhanced in the waiting.

Waiting was also a factor in Lily's arrival. She was overdue and her mum and I spent the days beforehand in quiet preparation and wondering and no small amount of prayer on my part. The previous week had been feverishly busy with last minute shopping and doctor's visits but as the due date came and went, we too gave over to this mystery of life. We slowed the pace of our days and confined ourselves mainly to home. A steady rhythm entered into our days – and a measure of tranquillity.

The day of Lily's birth was full of waiting too: waiting for the doctor to rupture the membranes; waiting to see if labour would be established; waiting for each contraction to end; waiting for 'life' to come. Family and friends were supporting this whole process from afar but that support was tangible in the room and evident in all who were present. All who were present too, were drawn into the rhythm of mother and baby. In spite of the effort, pain and discomfort evident, there was an air of purposeful serenity present as the outside world with all of its cares and distractions faded from our thoughts.

The moment of birth was a dying and rising moment as this baby left the world it had known and quietly entered a very different world. Any pain, anxiety or concerns vanished and were replaced by relief, gratitude, peace and joy at the baby's safe arrival....

Both of the above events are 'big' examples of dying and rising and yet life prepares us for these by providing us with many smaller experiences of dying and rising in our day to day living. These invite us to see the pattern and feel the rhythm of this process in little ways. We experience them ourselves and also as 'bystanders' when we share others' lives.

Fran Dorf in his book *The Art of Passingover* reflects on this process in the light of the Exodus story. He identifies 3 stages in the dying and rising process: *Letting go, Letting be, Letting Grow*. For Dorf these stages equate with the Israelites' escape from Egypt, the wandering in the Desert, and entering the Promised Land. The same three stages can be seen in Jesus' story: the Agony in the Garden [*not my will but thine be done*]; the trial and death of Jesus; Easter morning. I believe these stages Dorf outlines are a way of looking at so many events in our lives and so preparing us for the 'big' events.

Dying, giving birth, living each day – none come without struggle. As Christians we have The Word to guide us:

I am the Way...

Do not be afraid, I am with you...

Come to me all you who labour and are heavyburdened, and I will give you rest...

Love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself....

I will send my spirit to be with you....

The Lord has done great things for me and Holy is God's name.

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