

NOVEMBER IS THE MONTH WHEN WE REMEMBER OUR DEAD – SO THIS WEEK, ON MONDAY AND THURSDAY WE CELEBRATE OUR TWO MEMORIAL MASSES.

THURSDAY IS ALSO THE 24TH ANNIVERSARY OF HUGH CAMPBELL O'NEILL WHO DIED ON 21 NOVEMBER 2000, AGED 9. THE REFLECTION BELOW – ENTITLED **BLIND FAITH – WAS WRITTEN BY HIS FATHER, IAN, IN 2009**

Not long ago I got into a conversation about religion in a pub. A friend remarked that he really admired people like me with blind faith. I stopped him and said I objected to 'blind' always being put in front of faith, presumably to contrast it with the clear-eyed reason of agnosticism or atheism. I pointed out that I had not always been a practising Christian and had become one only at the age of 25 after years of reasoning and reflection. I came to believe that the Resurrection was the most reasonable explanation to account for what happened after the death of Jesus, and that the logical consequence of this belief was to join a church.

However, since that conversation, I have been thinking and realise that there is a large element of blindness in my faith or trust in God, but that has not always been the case. Jesus tells us in the Gospels that every hair on our heads has been counted by God and that not even a single sparrow falls to the ground without God knowing about it. I believe I have to try to trust that everything that happens to me is according to God's will but I have never been very good at doing so. The hardest test was when my nine-year old son, Hugh, died in November 2000, after falling off his bike for no apparent reason. One famous prayer that I discovered after I became a Catholic has always stuck in my throat.

It was written by St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits: *Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will – all that I have and call my own. You have given it all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.* I could imagine, or at least hope, that I would be prepared to give up my own life if God demanded it but I could not include my two sons in 'all that I have and call my own'. That was asking too much. penetrate and then I have to rely on faith.

But faith does not mean not having doubts. Just as the absence of fear is not courage but recklessness, so the absence of doubt is not faith but credulity. We are only brave when we feel frightened but do not let the fear overwhelm us. Likewise, I am faithful if I do not let the siren voices of doubt erode my trust. In the weeks after Hugh died, I scoured the Bible to try to make sense of his death and to sustain my faith. Among the countless reiterations of 'Do not be afraid' (the commonest phrase in the Bible) and reassurances that God loves us and wants good things for us, I kept coming back to Isaiah ch. 55 vv. 8-9:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. These words are not at first hearing consoling. They may even sound crushing, dismissing our futile attempts to understand 'Acts of God'.

But, the bottom line is that we must take God's promises on trust, even if they appear utterly incomprehensible from our human perspective. A few weeks after Hugh's death, two things happened on the same day. The first, in the morning, was that we received a message of condolence, written on the back of a postcard showing a detail of beautiful contemporary stained glass window from the monastery of Taizé in Burgundy. It showed a young boy, whom I first thought was an angel, but then I noticed that what I had taken for wings were actually hands resting on the boy's shoulders. I turned the card over to find out the subject.

It was Isaac, which meant that the hands must be those of his father, Abraham. In one of the most horrifying stories in the Bible God tests Abraham's faith to the limits by telling him to take his young son to a distant mountain and there to sacrifice him. Abraham does all that God commanded and gets as far as raising the knife to kill Isaac when an angel intervenes. I could never identify with Abraham's unquestioning submission to the will of God, but that afternoon, I was listening to Choral Evensong on Radio 3, and the first reading was that very same story. It then struck me that something not dissimilar had happened to me: God had taken away my son and left me my faith. It gave me no comfort.

I often feel that it would be easier not to have to believe in an all-loving, all powerful and all-knowing God, who let my son die. Yet, the fact of Hugh's death and my belief in the Resurrection are two separate things. His death is no different in essence from those of countless other innocent people, who died in accidents or natural catastrophes, 'Acts of God'. If their deaths do not shake the core of my faith, why should Hugh's? Whatever my feelings of anger and desolation, to go on doggedly trusting in God is an act of will, which I can choose to exercise even when blinded by grief. Reason can only take me so far along the road.

There are areas of darkness where its light cannot And, nine years on from Hugh's death I can see that my faith has given me consolation and even a quiet joy. I accept that, however much I believe my faith in God is reasonable, I will never make sense of Hugh's death this side of the grave, or much else that happens in the world. I accept also that it may turn out when I die that I am wrong and there is nothing.

But until then all I can do is hold on to faith, which I am now prepared to acknowledge is, ultimately, blind.

This is the second of four reflections by Ian Campbell on the death of his son, Hugh, written between 2004 and 2013.