



Loss: a Christian reflection

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This is the thing we all have in common. All of us have to deal with loss. Use the word and you are perhaps most likely to think about the loss we feel when someone dies. That loss can be shattering. As a priest, I have met men and women living lives completely shaped by grief. Others can suffer bereavement, feel it very deeply and yet live with it more confidently and hopefully. Loss though, is not just an experience of death. We gain and lose constantly as we live our lives. We make some friends and lose others, we can lose our health, we lose strength and capacity as we get old. We lose confidence when we are anxious and in dementia we can suffer cruelly, a loss of memory. Loss is a thing we share. It is inevitable and inescapable.

Faith may help you think about loss, it can help you deal with loss, but faith will not protect from you from loss. That is a lesson I really only understood fairly recently. Because I am a priest I have spent many hours talking to people who have suffered loss. I have preached at funerals, thought about bereavement. Only when my father died, did I really understand that although I had beliefs that I could wrap around this experience, I still had to feel it. I still had to suffer it.

Christian faith suggests that our experience of loss shapes us almost from the very beginning. In the story that Genesis tells, about creation, God puts human beings in a garden where they will have all that they want and, apparently, not suffer loss. In Eden, they will not die. In this story what Adam and Eve do wrong is to take something for themselves. They have all that they need but they steal for themselves a forbidden fruit. Their great mistake is to be *possessive*. Their punishment is that they are driven out of Eden. They lose their home and they will, in time, suffer death. So, Adam and Eve suffer loss as a punishment.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3:19

The Bible then repeats this message that human beings are tormented by loss. The Book of Job, in the Old Testament, is one long commentary on the fact that human beings grieve over what they have lost and struggle to understand that. We hear Job telling us this is the way things are:

human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward.

Job 5:7

Death in particular becomes the thing we fear:

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon

Psalm 55:4

In St Paul's hands death is the enemy, it is actually the *last* enemy (I Corinthians 15:26) and it is still, as it was in Genesis, associated with sin and error. Sin leads to death; death is the *wages* of sin (Romans 6:23).

The fundamental idea here is that we do feel loss, but that it is not our natural state. Loss is a punishment; we were made for something else and we feel loss because we constantly long to be regain what was taken from us in Eden. That is an idea that is picked up in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Hebrews 13:14

In the New Testament, Christ finally triumphs over death. So, although you and I still live in a world where people do die and suffer that feeling of loss, scripture promises that the human story will not end in death. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ there is the promise that, in God's good time, there will be no more loss and all things will be brought to completion and restoration. That is why The First Letter of Peter can suggest:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you

1 Peter 1:3-4

The Book of Revelation imagines time finally ending with a city (it is actually Jerusalem) prepared for us.

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

Revelation 21:3-4

Prayer

In the 17th century, the priest and poet, John Donne wrote about the idea that in heaven all things are finally in an equilibrium in which nothing can be lost or disturbed.

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity: in the habitations of thy majesty and glory, world without end. Amen.