

Is it God's will?

I visited her home back in October in Mississippi. She had just returned from Sunday evening Mass. Her three youngest children were excited to have her home.

Just over two months later, I received a phone call that she had just died from complications because of pneumonia. I was in shock. I was shocked into silence. There were no words; no magical utterances that would turn back the clock. Reality set in and there was no choice but to accept the inevitable with its unanswered questions.

I emailed her mother reminding her that her daughter and family she left behind would be in my thoughts, prayers and Masses. Still, such a gesture seemed so inadequate during such painful times. But it was a start.

The next morning, as I read the Office of the Readings for that day, I brought the family along, joining them with my morning prayer. Psalm 35 seemed appropriate for the occasion. It said, "O, Lord, plead my cause against my foes, fight those who fight me. Take up your buckler and shield, arise to help me."

Yes! The foe was the cruelty of life in this instance – so young, prime of life, a young family dependent. The plea – "help me" uttered thousands of times by her family and friends. "Help me" to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. "Help me," like you helped Jesus in his own agony when he cried out to you – "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"

The psalm continues, "O Lord, how long will you look on! Come to my rescue...O Lord, you have seen. Do not stand a far off."

Following that prayer, I headed off in the morning darkness for my morning walk. Being surrounded by that darkness, I tried to connect that darkness with the devastating death of a young mother. Surely, later that morning, the darkness would evaporate and be replaced by light. Still, I wondered, as her family sat in the darkness of shock and grief, when would they be able to replace the darkness with a glimmer of light?

Archimedes Law reminds us – "Nature abhors a vacuum." When the tragedy of a sudden death occurs, we desperately try to fill that vacuum. We fill it with words that are totally inadequate; with busyness which distracts us temporarily from the gaping hole left in life.

When such tragedy happens, words fail us as they should but we still use them in order to make a feeble effort to attempt to lessen the pain. We say things like "She is in a better place" but the "better place" would be to continue to be present with her children as a loving mother.

We may say things like, "God wanted her more," but, if that is the case, then where is that loving, forgiving God. To our human way of thinking, "nonsense!" We all know that her children needed her more.

We find ourselves saying "It was God's will." Such statements might be an effort to explain, assure or console and emanate from a grieving heart. But, they make the grieving family question God's motives.

When Jesus' friend, Lazarus died, Jesus uttered two words, – "Jesus wept." Lots of tears will continue to be shed. Just maybe, Jesus might shed his own tears in union with the grieving family.

As priests, we try but fail to make sense of such tragedy. We search for words of comfort and consolation but then feel so inadequate. Words fail us, as well as failing everyone else's words. We try to bridge a gap between the here and now painful reality of this tragedy with the yet to come promise. So often, it is a bridge too far but that doesn't stop us attempting to connect it.

All we are left with is mystery; the mystery of life and death; the mystery of beginnings and endings; the mystery of trying to rationalize and explain something that is beyond logic or reason but is caught up in the Mystery itself – God.

So, is it God's will? The mystery remains a mystery that cannot be solved. It calls on us to let go of the known for the unknown; of the logic for the illogical; of what we wish to control for the uncontrollable; of doubt for a kernel of a greater faith and hope in Mystery itself.