

Traveling Companion: What do you say?

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As a priest for the past thirty-five years, I have celebrated hundreds if not close to a thousand funerals. These funerals have ranged from babies to people in their late nineties; from accident victims to teenagers; from cancer victims to heart attack victims; from my own parents to my aunts and uncles. It is never easy whether one is family or a complete stranger. The question that haunts me is: "What do you say?" Amid the tears, the grief, the anger, the hurt, the resentment, the mourning, the questions, what do you say that might give the family a glimmer of hope that is not based on pious platitudes but on the greatest promise from a God who continues to care, love, heal and be present with even at the darkest moments of our lives.

Recently, I had to officiate at the funeral of two well-known parishioners, husband and wife, C.J. and Mimi – victims of a murder-suicide death. I wrestled for days and nights with two questions: "Why?" and "What do you say?" They were the very same questions a whole community asked in their shock and disbelief. What do you say to two families totally devastated by the shock of that early Friday morning discovery? What do you say to a community that respected and loved both of them? What do you say to a packed church of people who gather for their funeral Mass?

Someone once said that it is not the answers to our questions that enlighten us, but the questions themselves.

There are no words that will take away the pain. There is no logic that will explain what happened to C.J. and Mimi. There is no magical pill that will help us forget, nor should there be. No words, no matter how eloquent, will take away the pain. We never forgot those we truly love. The deeper the love, the more painful the parting!

Yes, words fail us. They become inadequate. They fall short. Words are our efforts to try and explain or rationalize something that cannot be explained or rationalized. When words fail us, we have no choice but to look beyond what words cannot capture or explain. We have to embrace something that is both wordless and illogical. We have to journey deeper into a gift, the gift of faith. What do people do at funerals like C.J. and Mimi's who are not blessed with the gift of faith? In the deepest ways, they are at a loss for words.

St Augustine said that "faith is to believe what you do not yet see; the reward for this faith is to see what you believe," or as Scripture puts it, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen."

When words fail us, it is only fitting that we come to a place where the Word of God can shepherd us through this valley of darkness that surrounds us.

The cross we are asked to carry is not of our own choosing. So often, we never know how big or how heavy the cross is that someone we love has to carry. Yet, the cross is a journey from pain to life; from Calvary to Resurrection

Even Jesus didn't choose his own cross. It was chosen for him. In his hour of greatest need, he too had to cry out from the cross, "My God! My God. Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or to remove it. He came to fill it with his presence.

I saw a sign in a home recently that said: "Earth gives us sorrow that only heaven can heal." C.S. Lewis put it very well when he said, "God whispers in our pleasures, but shouts in our pain."

Nouwen, said, "Hope is willingness to leave unanswered questions unanswered and unknown futures unknown. Hope makes you see God's guiding hand, not only in the gentle and pleasant moments, but also in the shadows of disappointments and darkness."