

Seeing Christianity through the lens of AIDS

Less than two years ago, I lived in a small town where AIDS was what you provided to people who had walking disabilities. This new disease that city people seemed to be talking about was no concern of ours. Where we lived, everybody knew everybody (or so we believed) and nobody WE knew was high risk. And so in our churches, for example, the flurry of paranoia some years ago over the use of a common cup at the eucharist was simply a non-issue. AIDS was somebody else's problem.

Not any more. AIDS is my problem. In the past year, I have been to the dying of one person with AIDS, and conducted the funerals for two. I have spent enough time at Casey House (Toronto's AIDS Hospice) to have learned the names of the volunteers. I have spent hours reading and musing both about the disease itself, and issues related to sexual orientation and the rise of drug abuse. And I have wept.

No doubt, it is to be expected that my profession would place me in the way of those with AIDS. But you see, it isn't just my job which makes me passionate about this. I have lost a friend, too, in the past year. And yet another acquaintance has been recently diagnosed. AIDS is with us. And with the number of diagnosed cases in this country expected to quadruple in the next four years, some of us are going to die. Others will be bereaved. All of us will have the problem.

In some ways, the rest of our society has been much quicker to recognise this than the Church has. Professionals and groups in every quarter have mobilised their resources and energy to provide treatment, support and research. And they have done a remarkable job. The tendency for the Church is to be a bit overwhelmed by other people's expertise. After all, we reason, we don't have the medical training to provide comfort. We don't know the system well enough to organise home care or volunteers to run errands. We don't have the money to subsidise loss of income. We don't have the facilities to provide palliative care.

We don't have the expertise to do research. The tendency for the Church is to think it has nothing to add.

Well, fortunately, there are people who don't believe that. Last summer a young man -- a boy, really -- wandered into the coffee hour looking for a priest. As far as I could make out, he had no church connection anywhere. He certainly didn't know anybody here. But he latched onto me as if I were his only friend in the whole world. And why? Because he had to tell somebody -- and not just anybody, but somebody who believed that God cares about stuff -- that he had just been told he was HIV positive, and he was afraid he was going to die. Here is my question: Why do you suppose that he came in here? The church hasn't exactly got a reputation for Christ-like compassion when it comes to AIDS. Why wouldn't he have chosen his doctor? Or an employee assistance programme officer? Why not a drinking buddy? Or his parents? Why a priest? Why the Church?

It is a source of constant amazement and discouragement to me that Christians have such an impoverished view of what they have to offer in the face of something like AIDS. Just as it is a source of constant amazement and much joy to me that every once in a while, somebody -- like this young man -- will come forward and dare to demand our ministry anyway. Every so often, someone will come forward and beg us to be who we are.

For we do have a ministry, and a ministry which is uniquely ours because AIDS itself is a disease which forces us up against matters profoundly religious, profoundly spiritual. And, we are, after all, a people -- the people -- who have made it our daily business to sit in the very presence of God and to reflect on things of the spirit. There are at least four aspects to our ministry to people living with AIDS.

First, AIDS is a terminal disease. It forces us to deal with the fragility of our human existence, and with death. And the gospel is about nothing if it is not about this. There is no other institution in our society -- unless you count the Department of Vital Statistics -- which provides a rite of passage for death. It is the Church, with its confidence in the God who lies beyond, which is able to coax people to embrace their dying as they have embraced their living. It is ours to teach people how to die.

Secondly, AIDS is not the kind of tragedy that inevitably brings out the best in people. It is not like, say, the site of a natural disaster, where even the most miserly people will be falling all over themselves to be generous to victims of the tornado, or whatever. AIDS isn't always like that. Often enough a young man must not only tell his family that he is terminally ill; he is also telling them for the first time that he is gay. And it doesn't take much imagination to realise that if he hasn't told them that until now, it is because he was afraid they wouldn't take it very well. There can be a morass of conflicting emotions, anger, blame -- in short, a real mess. And my friends, death is no time for a family to be at enmity. One ministry which the Church can provide is the ministry of reconciliation. And the gospel is about nothing if it is not about this. Indeed, it seems to me that this is our very charter ministry: we only exist as Church at all because Jesus Christ reconciled us to God. And we are to be reconciled to one another.

Thirdly, if you have ever been depressed, if you have ever been bereaved, if you have been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, you will know that what gets you through the valley of the shadow of death is the hope that tomorrow the sun will shine. The church can be a voice of hope. And the gospel is about nothing if it is not about

this. Hope for us is not mere wishful thinking. It is dogma. We believe, as an article of faith, that the good has the power to triumph over evil, the cause of health over sickness, life over death. A Christian is, by nature, an optimist. And in these dark days, we very badly need optimism.

And fourthly, there is nothing like a terminal disease, and particularly a terminal disease which is more apt to claim young lives than old lives, to make people ask WHY. We are rational creatures: God made us that way. And so we look for meaning in the things that bewilder us, we seek order in chaos. Why does God allow suffering? Does God send it -- ever? Does God care? The Church is in the business of interpreting the ways of God to the world. And the gospel is about nothing if it is not about meaning. There is an awful lot of bad theology out there. And it is incumbent on us to seek the best in biblical scholarship, to study our theological tradition diligently, to examine our own experience of God prayerfully, and to speak the truth in the best way we know how.

Companions in dying, ministers of reconciliation, purveyors of hope, prophets of meaning: This is what we can be. It is, I believe -- profoundly -- what we are called to be. The question is, Will we?

"SEEING CHRISTIANITY THROUGH THE LENS OF AIDS" is a sermon preached in Ontario on AIDS Awareness Sunday in 1989. It is reprinted from Integrator, the newsletter of Integrity/Toronto.

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