

There can sometimes be something very beautiful as someone comes towards the end of their life, and in the time after they have died. The preciousness of time shared, the deep significance of each moment, and the feelings of love and loss can be both sad and lovely.

I hope none of you are waiting to watch the last episode of Call the Midwife... We watched it the other day, with the tissues at the ready - they should really have special Call the Midwife boxes. The coming to the end of Sister Evangelina's life - that great force of nature - was sad and beautiful - the last holding of a newborn baby, the calm and sorrowful dignity of her sisters preparing her body and dressing her - the outpouring of affection as people came to see her in her coffin - and the sense of deep emotion as the horse drawn hearse prepared to leave.

She had no flowers - she had always given herself fully to her vow of poverty - but Sister Monica Joan knew the right thing to do, and brought her solid, dependable shoes to place on her coffin for her final journey. It reminded me of the funeral we held for a farmer in a village church in Lincolnshire, with his flat cap, with the elasticated band, placed on the coffin - it was just him.

Where does the beauty come from at times like this. It is perhaps an uncovering - and uncovering of the unique and precious nature of this individual - and uncovering of the

rich mystery of the gift of life - and above all, an uncovering of love. Words and spoken and actions are performed when someone dies which often uncover the real depth of love and affection which may well have been unspoken, but in which they have been held, and are still held.

Sadly for some people the end of life does not come with such beauty - it can come suddenly or in a very difficult way. The ending of Jesus' life came in the most difficult way possible. But in today's gospel story there is a moment of beauty - a moment given, among friends, in a place of safety and love, before the terrible happenings in Jerusalem.

In this story it isn't the unnamed sinful woman who anoints Jesus, it is Mary, who we have already met, sitting at his feet. Now perhaps she has an intimation of what is to come, and she expresses her love by using this most expensive perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus. Often, after someone has died, we look back and see times shared together in a new light, shining with a new significance, and so it is here. We see this as a beautiful preparation for the journey of Jesus to the cross, and beyond.

The Anointing at Bethany by Malcolm Guite

Come close with Mary, Martha , Lazarus  
So close the candles stir with their soft breath  
And kindle heart and soul to flame within us  
Lit by these mysteries of life and death.  
For beauty now begins the final movement  
In quietness and intimate encounter  
The alabaster jar of precious ointment  
Is broken open for the world's true lover,

The whole room richly fills to feast the senses  
With all the yearning such a fragrance brings,  
The heart is mourning but the spirit dances,  
Here at the very centre of all things,  
Here at the meeting place of love and loss  
We all foresee, and see beyond the cross.

Almost smell the perfume - sense of loss, and of beauty -  
above all a sense of the love of Mary - reflecting the love  
of Jesus himself, the world's true lover.

There is another poem that speaks about death and love,  
by Philip Larkin. It's about a monument in a church, with  
the husband and wife for ever holding hands, and it ends  
by saying 'what will survive of us is love'. Even in the  
great sadness of loss, we know that love continues - the  
love is the reason for our sadness. As we share again next  
week in the sad events of Holy Week, we are reminded  
that love is indestructible - and that gives us hope. If we

look beyond the cross we see that love continues to shine -  
shining back from the place where all love is held within  
God's love.

Last week I went to pray for a lady in one of our care  
Homes who was very near the end of her life. I was  
privileged to be able to anoint her, as Mary anointed Jesus  
- as a sign of God's love and blessing at the end of her  
journey here. And after I had anointed her I said the prayer  
that I always say, which is a promise that beyond the  
boundaries of our life here, there is an inexhaustible depth  
of love, and although our journey here may come to an  
end, we trust that our Lord will lead us through to share  
that love with him. This is my prayer:

Lift up your face to the light. The mark of Christ is upon  
you. Walk free and open your heart to life, for Christ  
walks with you into a new day.