

July 2012

Calculating Hope – A Cutting Edge Reflection *by Margaret Siberry*

The news wasn't good. 'He's got a 30% chance of surviving,' the nurse told us on Tuesday. Patrick, the 15 year old interpreted this news that his father had a 70% chance of dying. We all wanted to cling on to the hope that Simon would be in that fortunate, 'odds' segment but the anxiety was gnawing and raw. The next day was worse – a surgical procedure to keep that 30% sliver of hope alive resulted in heart and blood pressure problems and the consultant wanted to talk to the family.

'He's deteriorated overnight and we are giving the maximum support we can to maintain his blood pressure. He's on a ventilator and we're monitoring his heart carefully. We'll just have to wait and see if the medication takes effect.'

'What are his chances now?' asked Patrick, who is good at Maths and can deal with numbers. 'Well, we'd have to say only about 10% now. But we'll wait and see how he copes with the medication. We can't do any more to support his blood pressure but we want to give it more time.'

I'm their grandmother and I'm trying to help these three young people aged 17, 15 and 13 live with the news they have just received from a sensitive consultant who recognises the children's need for truth about their father. They don't want to be fobbed off with platitudes. They do want to believe the odds can work in their father's favour. They have questions, real and raw, and they are visibly frightened by what could happen. They cry when they see him in an induced coma, wired up to machines that breathe for him, feed him, manage his kidneys and work his heart. But they love him so they stroke his arm and talk to him in the hope he can hear.

They are overwhelmed by the suddenness of this change in the routine of their lives and they are deeply fearful. But their unencumbered hearts seek truth, demand of us, of the nurses and doctors that we are honest. I am struck by their courage. They need to know the odds and they need to know that we are being truthful. They resist being palmed off with half answers, false hope and prevarication. They understand the maths. Hope for them now lies in regaining the 20% margin that was lost overnight. Coping for them rests in truth, in trusting that everyone around them will acknowledge what is real and own that we are all struggling, as they are, to continue hoping in the face of unlikely odds. In their own way, at different times each one asks, 'Is my dad going to die?' And we all know he could and we struggle to overcome the fear of impending tragedy.

So we talk lots, we visit the hospital and we try to carry on with life as best we can. I sense an anger in Jacob, the eldest, 'It's not fair to my dad.' And Grace, the youngest is very quiet, a bit too withdrawn. They track back. We all track back. Why did this happen? How did it happen? What did we miss, should have noticed? Should we have been more caring? Self-examination, feelings of guilt and of responsibility are there, I'm sure, as is normal at such times. So much is unanswerable. A percentage is fact, is real, is hope to cling onto.

'They haven't said no hope Grandma. He's got a 10% chance.'

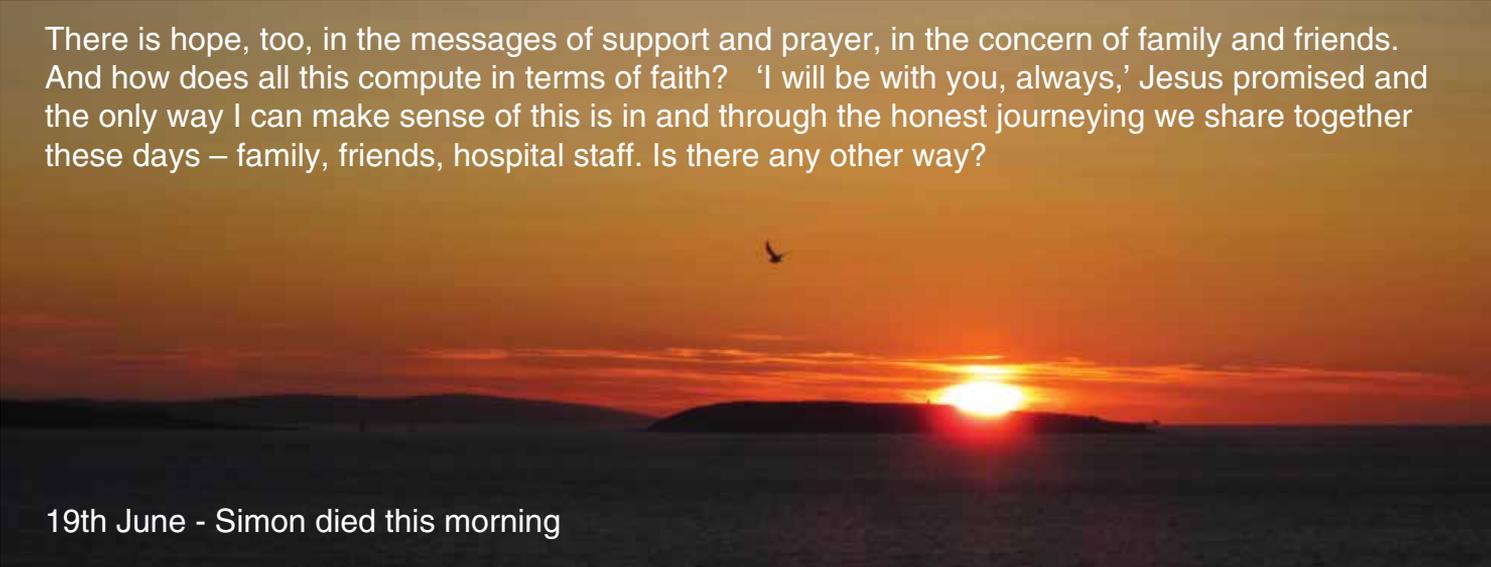
No one has shouted at God yet - too fearful for that - though I sense in Jacob the Job questions, the perennial questions, 'Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does a good God let suffering happen?'



As I try to accompany them in the uncertainty and anxiety of their days I ask myself what the lived experience of hope feels like, an incarnated, fleshed out hope that can touch troubled young hearts. It seems to me that in the mix there has to be truth spoken in love, a fundamental integrity and honesty about the messages they hear and about the feelings those around them are carrying. They need to be able to trust because so much else is fragile. Hope is embodied as they are enfolded in loving, trusting relationships.

Each day they wait for the report from the hospital, placing their hope in the heads and hearts, the hands and eyes of the doctors and nurses. Hope is focussed then in the knowledge, training and skill the professionals bring to bear, minute by minute, hour by hour as they monitor machines, dispense medicines, measure outputs and are attentive to the minutiae of bodily changes. Hope rises dramatically two days later when we hear that blood pressure has come back up and that crucial lost 20% chance has been regained. How mysterious that 30% all of a sudden feels like wonderful news when only days before it struck like a body-blow! Hope rekindled in a mathematical expression.

There is hope, too, in the messages of support and prayer, in the concern of family and friends. And how does all this compute in terms of faith? 'I will be with you, always,' Jesus promised and the only way I can make sense of this is in and through the honest journeying we share together these days – family, friends, hospital staff. Is there any other way?

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and red glow. A single bird is visible in flight against the sky. The foreground shows dark silhouettes of hills or mountains.

19th June - Simon died this morning