

AHPCC MIDLANDS GROUP
Tuesday 5th March 2019
Mary Stevens Hospice , Stourbridge



Attendance

Present

Sarah Bruce; Georgina Byrne; Leon Dundas; Helen Glithero; Stig Graham; Clare Griffiths; Catherine Hughes; Keith Judson; Martin McGonigle; Rob Pestell; Charlie Radburn; Tracy Robinson

Apologies

Elaine Anderton; John Austerberry; Tim Bush; Helen Cotter; Benedicto Da'Silva; Keith Duckett; Andy Green; Jill Groves; Zabia Khatoun; Andrew Martin; Martha McInnes; Claire Ord; Nick Partridge; Sheila Simmonds; Jane Wood





Presentation

Canon Georgina Byrne (Residentiary Canon at Worcester Cathedral and a Chaplain to HM The Queen) led our reflections on: 'How we deal with death in post-Christian culture?'

Georgina began her ministry in West Bromwich (1997). She identified a fairly static population, an area of distinct, post-industrial villages but with a population becoming

more diverse through immigration. She was fascinated to see how, on Mothering Sunday, streets would be full of parked cars as people visited "Mum" in the cemetery. In our supposedly secular society, beliefs in an afterlife persist and vary enormously.

Georgina looked at how those who have died are seen in law. A corpse is not just a thing/ a dead body but is not a person either. Those connected have certain rights and responsibilities. The body becomes a 'symbol of the deceased pre-mortem person'. For further reading see: 'The Law and the Dead' by Heather Conway. Available [here](#). We continued to reflect on changing attitudes towards the disposal of a dead body and what happens in funerals.

Georgina has made a special study of Spiritualism, which she defined at a simple level as: 'the belief that we can communicate with the dead and they with the living'. A recent BBC News article focussed on the burgeoning interest of 'Millennials' in Spiritualism. Click [here](#) for link. Georgina's book, 'Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England' is well worth reading. It is available from Amazon [here](#) but (given the price!) she suggests asking local libraries to order a copy for loan.

There were mixed responses to the rapid development of Spiritualism in 19th Century England. However, one thing it appeared to do was prove that there was life after death. Spiritualism refuted the traditional belief in heaven and hell. Instead it taught that spirits arrived in the 'Summerlands' and could progress/ ascend through different regions. It described a beautiful, colourful, lively and loving place. Ideas about loved ones being near, aware of us, even with us became commonplace.

Georgina argues that the Church of England adopted some of the language and assumptions associated with spiritualism - although continuing to frown on its practices. Post-mortem salvation and being reunited with loved ones were new ideas at the end of the 19th Century. There was an understandable surge of interest in Spiritualism after WW1. Young men who had died were spoken of as being present, living on etc. by clergy. This was a significant change from a century before and encouraged the Church of England to accommodate

prayers for the dead within its liturgies.

When it comes to mourning the dead in our 21st Century it is clear attitudes are changing. People often feel they shouldn't be sad. Many want a party or celebration of life. In a more secular culture, the thought is that all we can do is celebrate life that has ended – since there is nothing beyond. Furthermore, if there is an afterlife then most people adopt a 'spiritualist' viewpoint rather than consider God's judgement, heaven, hell etc.

Georgina then led us to consider ways in which the memories of an individual are 'curated'. We tell our stories when alive but after death that task falls to others who knew us. Their story is ours but not entirely so. How do we help people 'curate memory' and tell the story of those who have died?

This led to a consideration of memorial pages on social media. Is this a way of keeping people 'alive'? Heather Conway has described this development as the 'new Spiritualism'. A discussion followed on various aspects of what Georgina had shared, as well as people's recent experiences of conducting funeral services. The times are certainly a-changing!

Discussion

Claire Griffiths had raised the question in an e-mail about how we handle clergy/ faith leaders visiting our hospices/ hospitals without reference to either chaplains or medical staff?

Her concerns were partly pastoral – i.e. the benefit of liaison between chaplains and those visiting patients from a local faith community/ avoiding duplication/ offering complementary ministry etc. They were also practical – i.e. patients being given Communion without reference to medical staff when they may be unable to swallow!

It was felt that some kind of recommended guidelines would be helpful and Claire agreed to work on this.

Reflection

Keith led two short reflections. The first offered time to be silent after arrivals and introductions. The second (interrupted by technological incompetence!!) included the song 'Distant Son' by Scottish folk singer Dougie MacLean. Keith shared a personal account of how he used this song to mourn the death of his father in 2000. To listen to the song on YouTube click [here](#).