



Coming of Age

Growing older with grace

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Welcome to the second in our BRICK sessions under the title – Coming of Age, growing older with grace.

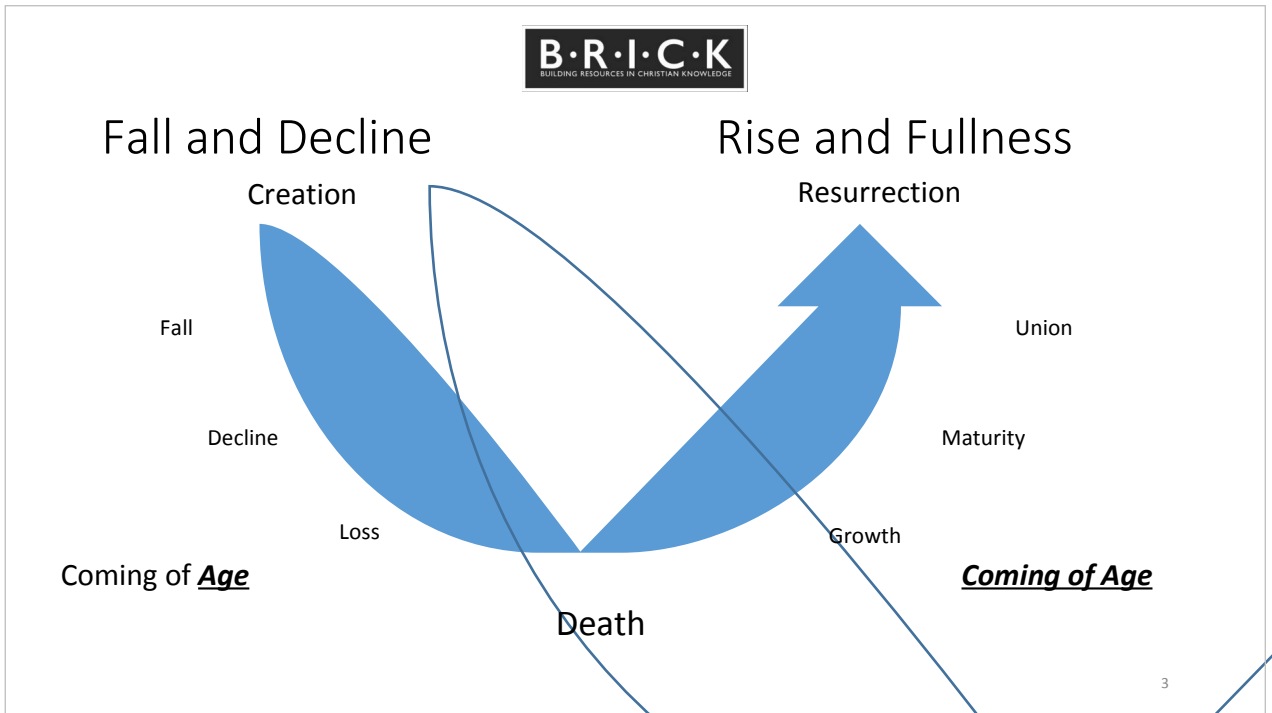
Course outline

- Session 1 – ‘Full of years’
 - What does the bible say about growing older?
- Session 2 – ‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away’
 - The experience of loss
- Session 3 – ‘To die is gain’
 - Approaching death
- Session 4 – ‘How should we then live’
 - Feedback / discussion / practical outworking

The course covers 4 sessions. In the first session we looked at what the bible says about growing older and I'll recap the main points from that in a moment. In the second session we will look at one of the common, and indeed biblical, experiences of growing older – that of loss.

In the third session we will consider the remarkable statement of St Paul that at the end of this process to die is gain.

Session 4 is envisaged as an interactive session that picks up on the first 3 sessions and allows us as a group to consider the relevance of this course to our own lives. That is not to say there will not be practical points in the first 3 sessions but we intend to focus them more on studying what the Christian understanding of this subject looks like. To help us with session 4 each week there will be paper and pens on the table to allow you to write down, comments, questions or issues for us to consider in week 4 (if they are not addressed before) – so please make use of this. In the 4th session we are proposing to spend some time sharing together on our own thoughts and experiences covered in each of the first three sessions. We are thinking of offering the opportunity to do that in groups – just to let you know in advance. If however you don't like being in a group there will be the option to write down your thoughts without being in a group – so there will be some flexibility.



Last week we saw that the biblical narrative presents us with a worldview that is represented by this diagram.

We saw that growing older is an outcome of the fact that we no longer live in the perfect world God created, and having fallen away from that we experience inevitably decline in many aspects of our life, ultimately resulting in physical death. We saw however that this isn't the full picture the bible presents but that there is also the narrative of resurrection and an opportunity to grow into spiritual maturity at the same time as experiencing the physical decline of aging.

These experiences are intended to be concurrent not sequential and we noted that they don't specifically relate to chronological age. So some younger people can be very mature and some older people not so.

We saw also that there were general expectations in the bible of the responsibilities that come with both being younger and older.



Mutual responsibilities

- On us as we grow older
- Grow old graciously
- Grow in wisdom
- Grow in our experience of God's faithfulness
- Share our wisdom and faith
- On us when we are the 'young ones'
- Show respect in our attitude
- Support practically
- Seek to learn from the wisdom of age
- Prepare in advance to grow old with grace

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We noted that we may find ourselves in both categories.

One sociological feature of the increased life expectancy of people is that we can find ourselves in the dual role of growing older but still having relatives who are older than us.

It would be good to say at this point that sessions 1 to 3 of this course are presenting the biblical narrative which is both at odds with the 'keep young and beautiful' culture we live in and also, as we shall see in this session, challenging to our natural sympathies.

So session 2,

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away

- **Job 1 v21**
- *²¹ And Job said, Naked (without possessions) came I [into this world] from my mother's womb, and naked (without possessions) shall I depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed (praised and magnified in worship) be the name of the Lord!*

I don't know how many of you read the passages from Job that I suggested last week as homework, but if you did you will know that this is Job's response at the end of chapter 1 to a horrific series of losses in his life.

Job is part of the wisdom literature in the bible and believed to have its origins in the earliest of the biblical literature. There is some disagreement over whether Job was a literal person or whether this book presents a fictional character through whom the immense subjects of loss and suffering are raised within the biblical narrative. Just as last week I sidestepped the issue of whether the Genesis events are to be taken as literal or figurative I am going to do the same with Job, since what we want is to see what these words from the bible are conveying to us. In similar manner I will, no doubt frustratingly, leave up in the air the role of the angelic being known as Satan in chapter 1.

For those of you who didn't manage the homework, or didn't know about it, chapter 1 presents us with a debate between God and Satan as to whether the upright and faithful character Job is only that way because God blesses and protects him. Satan suggests that were God to remove protection and blessing from Job he would turn against God. That protection having been removed Job experiences the loss of his possessions, his livelihood and the lives of all his children.

His response is the verse we are starting with tonight.

The bible project website summarises the book as follows

Milestones in Job

- God Tests Job
 - The book of Job questions God's justice. Will upright and blameless Job continue to serve God if he loses everything?
- Job Accuses God
 - Job accuses God of acting unjustly while his friends blame Job for wrongdoing. They all believe God operates the universe according to rules of justice
- Job Questions God
 - Job reviews his good works and questions why God would allow him to suffer, but he sees his pain through the lens of his limited worldview

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It is part of life experience that as we grow older we are more likely to experience loss in one form or another. This is not unique to growing older and indeed any of these losses could be experienced at any age, however clearly the longer we live the more likely we are to experience some of them

I am indebted to Gerald Richards for putting together this list – which we recognise may not be definitive but covers a number of common areas of experience

Milestones in Job

- God's Virtual Tour
 - God responds to Job personally with a virtual tour of the world. He reminds Job that His worldview is infinite while Job's is limited
- Job Learns Trust
 - God doesn't explain our suffering, but He reminds Job that we live in a complex world and asks us to trust His character and wisdom

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Aspects of loss

General Loss of height, a stooping posture, loss of hair, weakening of the voice, loss of dexterity

Sensory loss Eyesight, hearing and taste are affected

Mobility is reduced in most elderly people

Memory loss is common, in many the result of dementia – a term which describes a range of symptoms (memory loss, problems with reasoning and communication and change in personality).

Decreasing strength and energy which often begin in ‘middle age’

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Although Jesus wasn't saying it in the context of growing older His words to Peter describe the experience of loss very accurately:

[John 21:18 – ‘I assure you and most solemnly say to you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and walked wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and arms, and someone else will dress you, and carry you where you do not wish to go’]

Loss is the place where we do not wish to go – that is our natural and understandable reaction.

Let us consider the 5 milestones in the book of Job in this context.

Aspects of loss

CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MAY ADVERSELY AFFECT WELLBEING IN OLD AGE

Bereavement

Becoming a Carer

Losing driving licence

Financial difficulties

Moving to a care/nursing home

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Milestones in the experience of loss?

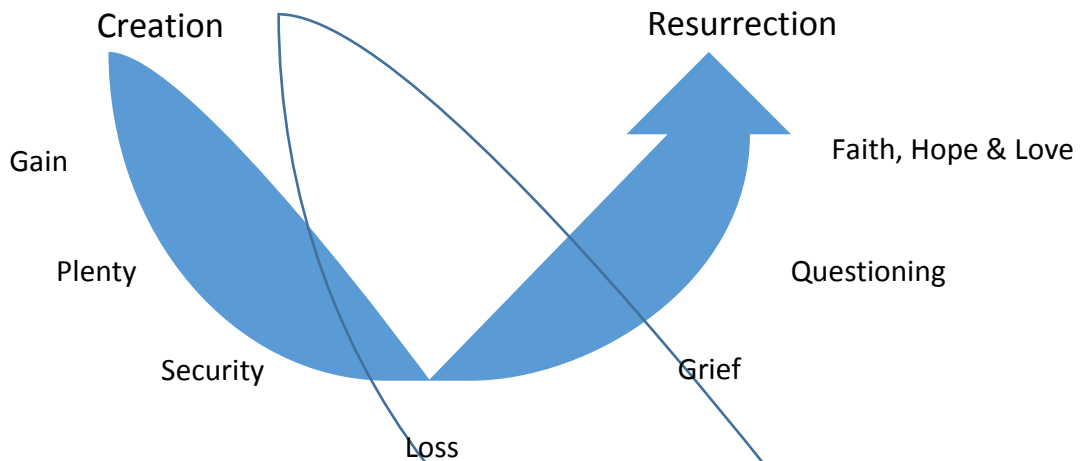
- Does God test us?
 - Loss is part of life and the bible expects us to experience it.
 - What have I done....
- Blaming God
 - Why me? It isn't fair. They don't deserve this.
- Questioning God
 - How can a God who says He loves me let this happen (to me / those I love)

BP 1 - The biblical picture appears to be that while God does not test us directly He allows life to test us. The word most closely associated with this in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter and Revelation is endurance. James links this directly to the experience of Job. Over the centuries there have been Christian views that suggested the experience of a faithful believer would not include loss, in fact this was the accusation that some of Job's so called comforters made to him, You cannot be faithful otherwise this wouldn't be happening to you. We have seen that in the last century with the existence of what is sometimes called a 'prosperity gospel'. This reflects what was known from the old testament as the 'Deuteronomic principle.' Put simply this, based on the book of Deuteronomy, says 'God will bless those who obey and punish those who disobey' and this will be experienced materially. This is a strong underlying principle in the OT. We see it in the NT when in John 9 v2 on encountering a man who was born blind the disciples ask Jesus – who sinned, this man or his parents? This is a statement based on Deuteronomic principle, it presents itself in many ways even today where in some countries those who are disabled are regarded as under God's curse. Jesus answer is simple and instructive – He says 'Neither'.

BP 2 - Experience tells us that people's lives differ – some seem to have it easy, some seem to experience dreadful lives, filled with loss. This is reflected in the themes of many psalms and in expression like 'why do bad things happen to good people.' When it happens to us, or to people close to us, it is not unusual to feel the inherent unfairness of our experience and to blame God. In this we make the same mistake as Job's comforters who believe God organises the universe we experience on the basis of what we perceive as justice, which is not the case as expressed clearly by Jesus when He says in the sermon on the mount [Matt 5v45] your Father in heaven makes His sun rise on those who are evil and those who are good, and makes the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Fall and Decline

Rise and Fullness



11

The biblical narrative around loss reflects the same understanding of both the inevitability of loss and the truth of the resurrection.

Job points out that we start with nothing after the creation of our own lives. So anything after that is gain. We can think of this in any terms we like whether it relates to physical prowess, financial status, employment, relationships and so on. However we choose to look at this we sometimes (but clearly not for everyone in the world) reach a condition which we could describe as plenty and associated with that is a sense of security based on the plenty we have. At the start of the book Job is clearly in this condition.

At some point there is an experience of loss which represents the removal of some or all of the gains we have accumulated. If I can use a personal example, I was in continuous, full time employment for 34 years and had, within the context of my employment, gained a lot and was the owner of plenty of material items and also the non-material possessions of a sense of worth, purpose and self-respect. Then I was abruptly made redundant. The loss I felt most was that of security. I was no longer in control of life because I no longer had the material 'power' to largely be self-determining. We can all relate this to loss we have experienced whether it be in terms of health, finance, relationships and so on. To again sound a bit C S Lewisish – in the experience of loss our world is unmade.

But the main purpose of this diagram is to illustrate that the aftermath of loss – grief, sorrow, anger, questioning, searching is not part of the loss, it is part of the road to resurrection. This is a significant element of difference between the biblical worldview and much of our cultural experience in the West. Of course counsellors and psychologists are more likely to see the relevance and the realism of the biblical narrative. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 book *On death and dying* proposed 5

Resurrection begins in grief and loss

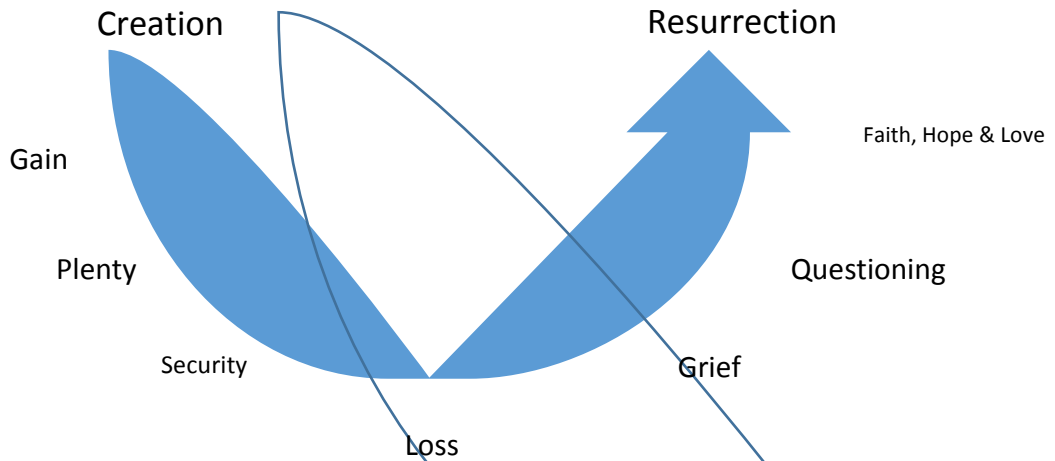
- The raising of the synagogue leader's daughter
 - 'Now they were all weeping loudly and mourning for her' Luke 8 v 40-56
- The raising of the widow of Nain's son
 - 'And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, Do not weep' Luke 7 v11-15
- The raising of Lazarus
 - 'Jesus wept' John 11 v1-46

Resurrection begins in grief and loss

- The raising of Jesus
 - ‘Jesus said to her [Mary] ‘Woman why are you crying?’
John 20 v 1-18
- The raising of Tabitha
 - ‘...all the widows stood beside him [Peter] weeping’ Acts 9 v36-43
- The raising of Eutycus
 - Paul said ‘Do not be troubled’ Acts 20 v 8-12

Fall and Decline

Rise and Fullness



Perhaps the most condensed narrative of this cycle is the remarkable gospel story of Lazarus in John chapter 11.

Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha and all three of them are friends of Jesus – the amplified translation describes them as dear friends.

When Lazarus becomes ill and this message reaches Jesus, who is elsewhere, his disciples are surprised when He chooses to stay where is and not go to Bethany where his friends live. Only after Lazarus has dies does Jesus make the journey there. The remarkable events that follow are recorded by the apostle John.

The raising of Lazarus -Martha

.....²¹ Martha then said to Jesus, Master, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

²² And even now I know that whatever You ask from God, He will grant it to You.

²³ Jesus said to her, Your brother shall rise again.

²⁴ Martha replied, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

We see in Jesus' encounter with Martha that the community who knew Mary and Martha were consoling them in their grief. Martha's first words to Jesus sound very like an accusation and contain the suggestion that Jesus could, and perhaps should, have done something to stop Lazarus dying – to avert the loss.

Jesus immediately raises the subject of resurrection. As God's encounter with Job, Jesus does not explain any reasons for the loss, He does not try to justify God, instead He looks to where Martha is going, not to where she has been – He looks forward to resurrection.

Martha takes this in a very general 'it'll all be ok in the end, in some future event' sense.

Then Jesus says the words that are the most profound words spoken in the presence of loss, Jesus says:

'I am the resurrection.'

Just as with Job the deeper question is that in all this loss do you trust God?

Or as Jesus effectively says to Martha – do you trust me to know best?

The raising of Lazarus -Martha

²⁵ Jesus said to her, I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, although he may die, yet he shall live;

²⁶ And whoever continues to live and believes in Me shall never [actually] die at all. Do you believe this?

²⁷ She said to Him, Yes, Lord, I have believed [I do believe] that You are the Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One), the Son of God, [even He] Who was to come into the world. [It is for Your coming that the world has waited.]

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The raising of Lazarus - Mary

³² When Mary came to the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she dropped down at His feet, saying to Him, Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

³³ When Jesus saw her sobbing, and the Jews who came with her [also] sobbing, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. [He chafed in spirit and sighed and was disturbed.]

³⁴ And He said, Where have you laid him? They said to Him, Lord, come and see.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ The Jews said, See how [tenderly] He loved him!

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The encounter with Mary begins in the same way – with her accusation of Jesus not acting.

V33 describes Jesus as deeply moved by the anguish of the mourners – commentaries explain that the sensation being described is not sorrow but anger. Jesus is angry at the impact that loss has on those who are left behind, or who are grieving because of the loss experienced by someone else.

Whether it be bereavement, relationship break up, loss of physical ability or mental ability, or something else, the biblical narrative tells us that the impact of loss on the individual and on those close to them causes God to be angry – not at the people involved but at the harm done to those He loves by the impact of loss.

In Isaiah however it also says this of the suffering servant, the description of Jesus [Isaiah 55 v3-4a] ‘He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their faces, He was despised and we did not appreciate His worth or esteem Him, but in fact He has borne our griefs, and has carried our sorrows and pains...’

We see this more clearly in this event than perhaps any other in the gospels as Jesus weeps.

The response of the Jews is very informative – ‘See how he loved him’

As in the diagram earlier the movement of resurrection through grief and questioning ultimately involves love.

As Paul said ‘three remain – faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love...’

Our previous vicar Guy would be no doubt amused to know that he shared a BRICK slide with the queen.



The greatest of these is love

- ‘Don’t worry if you cry – it’s just the love coming out.’
 - Guy Donnegan-Cross, funeral service welcome

- ‘Pain is the price we pay for love’
 - Queen Elizabeth II at twin towers site in New York

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The great chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13 contains a description of the movement towards love that comes as everything else is lost:

Prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease, knowledge will pass away, for in this time of imperfection we see in a mirror dimly, a blurred reflection, a riddle, an enigma, but then when the time of perfection comes we will see reality face to face, now we know in part then we will know fully just as we have been fully known by God...’

So if we are to grow older graciously we need to see loss as not a road to resentment and bitterness, or despair and anger but as part of a road to faith, hope and love.

We have come a long way from looking at the milestones in Job, but we have come to the final point of Job’s experience and to the critical question of loss.

Do we trust God?

Job’s answer was a resounding yes as you all know from Job 19 v 23 – you do know that verse don’t you...I suspect you do!

'I know that my Redeemer lives and at the last
He will stand upon the earth.
Even after my mortal skin is destroyed by death,
yet from my immortal flesh I will see God.
Whom I, even I, will see for myself, and
my eyes will see Him and not another'

This is the testimony of someone who experienced loss on a colossal scale:
Loss of livelihood, loss of possessions, loss of entire family, loss of health....

Job's 'comforters' tried to give him some pastoral care. They started well by sitting and grieving with him and making no comment. However they then went on to do things for which God roundly condemns them at the end of the book of Job – they attempted to comfort him by variously telling him that that it was all his fault, that God was punishing him, that it was something he should snap out of, they criticised his anger and questioning.

How do we comfort those who experience loss?

There is an Irish custom that if someone sees a funeral procession they choose to walk 7 steps in the same direction as the funeral party.

There is wisdom in that illustration that we walk with the person suffering loss – neither lagging behind them, perhaps by ignoring the subject completely or rushing ahead of them – perhaps by telling them to trust God (which is the right answer – but the right answer given at the wrong time is not helpful)

It is perhaps natural to try to answer the questioning that loss provokes – but God didn't answer any of Job's questions and his comforters gave answers that reflected where they were, not where Job was, or where God was.

Until the person experiencing loss comes to know for themselves that their Redeemer lives telling them it (true though that is) may make no difference, or at worse bring feelings of guilt – after all as Christians we are supposed to handle this – right? Wrong....Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus despite the fact He knew He was about to raise Him from the dead.

There are two things that we can hold onto, even if not expressed, on behalf of someone suffering loss – the first is as stated by Job – their redeemer lives.



‘Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors and gain an overwhelming victory through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present and threatening, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the [unlimited] love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

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Loss cannot separate us from God’s love whatever that loss might be.
We could put it like this:

General Loss of height, a stooping posture, loss of hair, weakening of the voice, loss of dexterity

Sensory loss Eyesight, hearing and taste are affected

Mobility is reduced in most elderly people

Memory loss is common, in many the result of dementia – a term which describes a range of symptoms (memory loss, problems with reasoning and communication and change in personality).

Decreasing strength and energy which often begin in 'middle age'

CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MAY ADVERSELY AFFECT WELLBEING IN OLD AGE

Bereavement

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**None of these can separate us from the love of God
which is in Christ Jesus**

21

I said at the beginning that sessions 1 to 3 of this course are presenting the biblical narrative which is both at odds with the 'keep young and beautiful' culture we live in and also challenging to our natural sympathies – our desire for everything to be 'alright'.

The biblical narrative that loss is inevitable but that the grief, and questioning that follow are part of the road to resurrection not part of the loss is counter intuitive. That the road to resurrection is not to forget the loss, or to try to regain the world as it was before the loss, but to learn to live in the new reality of the world that contains that loss, as Jesus still had the marks of the nails, is also against our natural inclination perhaps.

The road through loss to resurrection is a hard one

That love is part of the journey is easy to say, but hard to do.

You loved someone before they died, but how do you continue to love them after?

You loved someone before they developed dementia but how do you continue to love them after?

These are not easy questions and the biblical narrative does not suggest that they are.

In them for all Christians there is a need to somehow, in some way, hold close to Jesus.

The final statement on loss is His words to Martha, the words quoted in the Anglican funeral service:

'I AM the resurrection'