

*SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF A PWA (by Johan Viljoen)*

The sick have a special claim to the compassion, care and attention of the church. Jesus himself devoted a significant part of his ministry to healing. In Mt 25 we are told that we will be judged by the way we treat them (“I was sick and you visited me”). There is no doubt that those who are rejected by society also have a special claim to the compassion of the church. Jesus sought them out, and befriended them. In His time, these were the lepers, and those who were considered to fall short of the demands of God because of their ritual impurity. In our time, these are the people with AIDS.

In our time, it is difficult to think of a category of people that has been more stigmatized than they. AIDS patients lie in hospice beds, and eventually pass away there without ever even disclosing to their care givers that they have AIDS. This is due to the ostracism and stigmatisation that they have to deal with – this is even encountered in the medical professions, the very sector that is supposed to provide relief and understanding. In the frightening and highly charged world that a person with AIDS encounters, the church, by virtue of the values it follows, is called to swim against the tide of society, and to meet some of the more difficult issues. It is called to nothing less than to manifest Christ, to manifest the Kingdom of God, to the sick, the suffering and the rejected of our time.

The church has risen magnificently to the occasion in providing social services to people with AIDS. There is no institution in this country that has more home based care and hospice programs, caring for the physical and social needs of patients. The church provides care and compassion to thousands of orphans – those who remain behind after their parents have been cared for to the end. Their social and physical needs are also provided for until they can look after themselves. The Catholic Church in South Africa runs 44 home based care programs, and more than 20 programs focusing specifically on orphans. This is indeed a record to be proud of.

But after a terminally sick person has been washed, fed and cared for, the ultimate questions uppermost in his mind are: What happens when I reach the end? Where do I go to from here? What physical process do I go through to get there? How will it feel? Will I be accompanied or will I be alone? Questions concerning death are not discussed openly and comfortably in our society. Death is the ultimate taboo. Even in the church we avoid discussion of these issues. We either dismiss it as piety, or we avoid discussing it altogether. And yet there is no institution that is better qualified to deal with these questions. The message of salvation that has been entrusted to the church is, after all, the message of eternal life. The very founder of the church, Jesus, showed us the way Himself. He died. But “He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven.” After rising from the dead, He was seen by His disciples and others, who saw His new spiritual body. We are repeatedly told, by St Paul, but also by Jesus Himself, that He is the “first fruit”, that we will follow Him, that we will be transformed “in the twinkling of an eye” also to have a spiritual body – we will become like Him! The person lying in a hospice bed, too weak to lift himself up, unable to breathe because of the Pneumocystis Pneumonia that has filled his lungs, vomiting from the excruciating pain caused by the

Cryptococcal Meningitis on his brain, will leave this body behind when his spirit leaves it, and will become like Christ. And we already carry this hope along with us, inside us. It is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us. The church is, after all, the body of Christ – the risen, glorified, spiritual body. The suffering, tormented body has been left behind in the tomb. This is the powerful message of hope that the church has – it answers the most pertinent questions and fills the deepest void of a person with AIDS. The person who can accept it is healed – even if his body dies.

This is the hope that the church has to offer. Why are we so reticent to proclaim it? More often than not, patients in the terminal stages who broach the subject of death are told: “You’ll be fine. Don’t think about death”. Our attitude reveals two things:

*Firstly, our faith is challenged. We profess that Christ rose from the dead, and that we have eternal life in Him. But do we really believe this?*

*Secondly, we are confronted with our own fear of death. The Swiss psychologist, Dr Elizabeth Kubler Ross commented on this. She noted that those who are afraid to discuss death with terminal patients, are not afraid of the patient’s death. They are afraid of their own death.*

AIDS has brought these issues to the fore like nothing else before it. We are being challenged to be honest about our faith, and to proclaim the hope of eternal life.

Johan Viljoen, July 2003