



Nazareth Letter July 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The Mystery of our Mortality.
Two Letters

Riding the Waves

A Letter from Richard Carter

“The doctor said I should go to A&E because my oxygen levels are low” Jamie tells me on the phone “but I don’t want to have to sit in A&E all night.”

“I think you should go” I encourage her, anxiously.

Jamie did not have an easy life- sometimes her struggle with her mental health was such an exhausting roller-coaster. She wrote this reflection in the book she self-published:

The voices I hear are like the storm on the lake – crashing round and whirling up the world from which we need shelter. But there is no shelter from these voices. No running, no hiding. Can God calm the storm of these voices as Jesus calmed the storm? If he can then why doesn’t he? Is he sleeping while we suffer? Is it because he believes we have no faith as Jesus accuses the disciples? But there is another story of Jesus having power over the elements. This is when Jesus walks on water and calms the wind. When Jesus walks on the water, he does not get rid of the water, he does not cast the wind behind him instead of against him. He lets them both be – but he rides the waves. And just before he rode the waves, he went up the mountainside to pray. He focused on God.

When we focus on God, the storm of the voices can be all around us, but we can be the calm at the centre of the storm. We can ride the waves as Jesus did. God is the calm at the centre of the storm. ¹

Jamie Poncia passed away at St Mary's Hospital Paddington on Wednesday 3 July at 8.15pm while the listening groups which Jamie has always been such a steadfast part of

¹ See Gemma Poncia, *Reflections of a Voice Hearer, 3rd Edition*, Amazon Fulfilment 2013

where taking place at St Martin's and Bread for the World- the service she loved had just finished and Catherine Duce had held her in prayer. I was sitting beside her in ICU while a group of incredibly caring doctors and nurses tried everything to keep her alive. But Jamie was slipping away , her blood pressure declining , her heart beat becoming fainter on the monitor and her breathing dependent on oxygen. "Can I pray with her" I asked humbly not wanting to disturb but knowing that's what Jamie would have wanted. "Of course" the doctor said, making room at her bedside and pulling up a chair for me.

The room was quiet now just me and a very kind nurse. I placed my hand on Jamie's head and prayed for her and blessed her as I have many times before over the last 18 years but suddenly so painfully aware of what an amazing corner stone Jamie has been- always there, always prayerful, always kind- she was, in her little flat, at St Martin's and on zoom- an anchoress.

She was a person who had faced so many struggles in her life and mental health but through prayer she had learnt with such honesty to ride the storms with Jesus of her highs and lows- and to every listening group she brought a humble and astute wisdom, and to every Archers gathering a care and a kindness chopping the onions as we prepared and slipping out for a roll up if things were too intense- but always telling things as they were. I realised, as I sat beside her in hospital, that all those years I had been helping her to navigate life's storms, she had been more than helping me and others too- she grounded us, she was a person of deep faith and prayerfulness: without guile, without pretence, without show or ego- a huge soul- at the heart and on the edge- a Christian, the real thing. Totally present and totally honest without judgement. In the Nazareth Community she found her vocation and she always told me how much she loved it- in Nazareth she found her way home and I hope so much she will continue to show us the way. I remember her saying: "I believe there's a little piece of God in each one of us, in all of God's creation, called our soul. It's like a candle at the core of our being. Although in depression it feels like it, God cannot go out."

I am sure that Jamie had no idea how much she helped so many of us recognize that candle of light and to put our trust in God.

Richard Carter

July 2024

A Mystery to be entered into A Letter from Wendy Quill

It is February 7th, the day after my birthday and we are sat in a specialist Doctor's consulting room in central London.

“You were right to be worried,” he says. “There's a tumor, on the pancreas.”

“The worst,” whispers Pete.

“It's spread to the liver,” he says.

“Already metastasized,” whispers Pete.

Somehow, we stumble through questions, grasp what needs to happen next. When we return to the waiting room, I burst into tears. Pete comforts me but when I go into the Ladies he disappears.

“He's gone back into the Doctor,” the receptionist tells me. I go and join them. This is typical of us, my first expression is feeling, Pete's is thinking.

Finally, with all our questions answered for the moment, we make our way back through the start of the Friday rush hour.

That was the beginning and in many ways the worst, so far. What has followed has been rather like a roller coaster and in that, there have been problems to be solved. What treatment is best? What can he eat? What can he still do, of his old life? Some answers are clear and the result of science, some are more trial and error. These are the things that my scientist partner can understand and grapple with. But what of the turmoil of emotions, which I am trying to grapple with? Here there are no easy solutions, just mysteries to be entered into.

My daughter is an early support. When I tell her the diagnosis, I say, in my anguish, “I haven't loved him enough.” “Don't go there, Mum,” she replies. Fortunately, I recognize her wisdom in pointing out a “no entry sign” early in my journey. I remember one of the things the Doctor said, which sounded strange at the time, but is the only way to proceed. The time we have is a gift and we can only move forward.

As usual in our relationship, Pete uses this gift to support me practically when he dies. He gives me a spread sheet and memory stick with all the details of different financial accounts, he organises the bank so that his account becomes a joint one, somehow, like getting married, we never got round to this. He re-writes his will, supports me to do the same and most beautiful of all sets up a trust to buy a house, where my troubled son can live with money to support him. He recognises that, whilst he is alive, he provides the

wisdom and emotional support I need, to deal with my son's situation, without becoming a martyr. The money is important but far more important is the friends who agree to be trustees, who can provide that wisdom and support when Pete no longer can.

There are moments of great joy. We decide to get married, not just for practical reasons. When I tell my daughter, I say that I have plenty of lovely dresses, I don't need to shop. She tells me I must have a new dress for my wedding. At that point, we don't think we have much time, so she visits one Saturday, the day of her younger son's birthday bash, and we have a wonderful morning trying on clothes and hats and buying our outfits.

There are moments of revelation. Everyone says it takes a year or more to plan a wedding. They haven't learnt the trick of asking Richard Carter. We do it in an afternoon! The only things Richard can't supply are the dress and the cake. The St Martin's team rallies round and provides us with a day I shall never forget and will always treasure. Angela's beautiful singing voice, Richard's spirituality, love and hospitality, Sam's beautiful and thoughtful prayers, SMITFL's lovely lunch. My son-in-law might well ask, why did you wait so long.

There is plenty of confusion. Early on, I visit Maggies. This is a drop in space for cancer sufferers and their families. At this early stage I am really looking for advice about Pete's eating. Before he started treatment it was becoming increasingly difficult to find food he could eat. He now labels that time as "beige food time." But secretly I am also trying to find out what it will be like watching and caring for someone I love, dying of cancer. Of course, this turned out to be a problem I couldn't solve easily. At the moment I don't feel I need such places. The chemo has resulted in enormous improvements in the range and amount of foods Pete can eat. Of course, there may well be a time when I need the help of specialist, at home nurses but I have also learnt that we have the most wonderful friends who will not only do anything to help but will see it as a privilege to do so. As far as coping with Pete's death goes, what better supporters could I have on that journey than Sam, Richard, Angela, The Nazareth community and all my friends at St Martin's?

There is change too. Sometimes too fast for me to catch up. At first, there seems to be a need to do everything quickly because our time frame is 3 months to a year. Gradually that seems to lengthen, perhaps we are looking at two years, or more. This is another part of the mystery. When there is so little time, I want to spend it all with Pete, so I join him on jaunts with old friends that are more frequent than ever before. But as time goes on, I realise I am missing my supports. I like the routine I have developed in my retirement. The mix of voluntary work, social groups, intellectual stimulation, and seeing my family sustains me. If we are away too much at weekends, I miss St Martin's. I have never found

online church a good substitute. So, I learn that it is OK to stay at home sometimes when Pete is off with friends, as it has been throughout our life together.

And where is God in all of this? Well, I didn't believe in a God who would point a finger from Heaven, wherever that is, and cure Pete. I have long believed that suffering is part of the human condition, in fact....

*Grief is not in vain, it's our completion.
If the Gods ordain, love to be life's sweetness
Welcome too, its pain.*

These are not my words, and I am sorry I cannot find whose they are because I find them sustaining. I don't have any direct experiences of God being with me or carrying me. Rather I glimpse the back of his robe. These glimpses come: when Pete, with enormous courage, phones friends to tell them of the diagnosis; when those friends respond with such love and support; in the Saturday gatherings of The Nazareth Community; in the silence, which we share regularly and which becomes increasingly important to me; when people don't try to give me glib answers but hold my hand or hug me with love in their eyes; and in poetry, especially Mark Oakley's books. Our Lent course introduced me to George Herbert and I follow on with The Splash of Words, where I meet R.S.Thomas whose poems seem to refer to God as the divine absence. "We can never catch him at work, but can only say, coming suddenly upon an amendment, that here he has been." In poetry I find the language that can help me navigate the mystery and continue to plumb its depths.

Kneeling:
Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.

The meaning is the waiting. (R.S.Thomas)

Matthew 14.22-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Wonderings

I wonder if you have ever had news that changed your life in an instant. I wonder if you found that news a problem to be solved or a mystery to be entered into.

I wonder how grief or if grief is something we can welcome

I wonder where you find God when life seems to have turned upside down.\

I wonder how or if God has helped you ride the waves of a storm or prevented you from drowning

I wonder what it means to say the meaning is the waiting.