

The last word

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Going on ahead, preparing the way

I go on ahead to prepare a place for you!" Jesus speaks these words to his disciples on the eve of his death as he sits at table with them and senses their sadness as they grapple with his dying, his going away.

His words are meant to console them and give them the assurance that they aren't being abandoned. It's just that he is going on ahead to prepare a place for them to come and join him later.

That story speaks to me very personally because of how one of my sisters died. She was young, the mother of a large family, and seemingly too young to leave her small children behind. She was dying of a cancer which, while relentlessly doing its deadly work, mercifully left her relatively pain-free and clear in mind and heart to the very end. The cancer eventually took her to a point where she could no longer eat, but could still be nourished for a time by intravenous transfusions.

But these too eventually no longer worked and, once unhooked from the intravenous needles, she was told that she had roughly a week to live. She chose to spend those last days in a hospital rather than at home, with her family having easy, 24-hour access to her hospice bed.

The days leading up to her death were a sacred time. I took her Communion several days before she died and, with her head still very clear, she told me what I should say at her funeral liturgy.

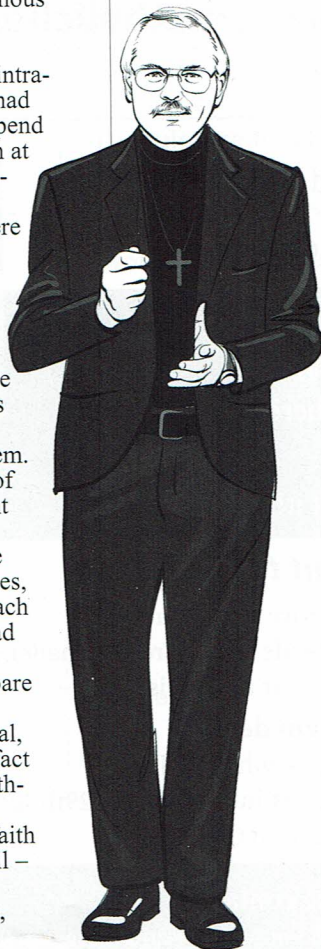
She had chosen that exact text where Jesus, on the night before he dies, tells his heavy-hearted disciples that he is going ahead, to prepare a place for them.

She shared how, before every one of her children was born, before she went to the hospital to give birth, she had carefully prepared everything at home for the new arrival, the crib, the nappies, the clothing, the room. She brought each of her children home to a place she had carefully prepared. And now she was going on ahead of them again, to prepare another place for them.

I preached those words at her funeral, and despite our grief and despite the fact that in moments like these there is nothing really that can be said that takes away the pain, her raw testimony of faith left us with an image that placed us all – not least her husband and children – inside a bigger story, a faith-narrative, which highlighted two things.



Our task as adults is to show the young how to live at a place where they've never been



First, the image of her going on ahead of her children awakened our grieving faith to the truth that a mother can go on ahead to prepare a place for her children in much deeper ways than simply bringing a newborn home from a hospital.

Second, her "going ahead" was also showing her children, and the rest of us, how to die, how to do that act that we all someday must do.

After you watch a good person die, you become less afraid to die yourself because you see how it can be done in an ordinary way, by an ordinary person, in a way that you can also do. In her dying, she prepared a place for us.

But this isn't a lesson only about dying. This image, "I go on ahead to prepare a place for you", is a metaphor which defines the essential task of our adult, mature years. Our task as "elders" – whether that be as a mother or father, an older brother or older sister, an uncle or an aunt, a teacher, a clergyman, a nurse, a worker, a colleague or a friend – is to live in such a way so as to create a place where the young can follow.

Our task as adults is to show the young how to live at a place where they've never been as yet.

And it is both a noble and humble task. Most of us cannot live up to the lofty ideals we see lived out in the lives of the great saints, though their lives have created an ideal place for us. However, while not everyone can live as Mother Teresa did, perhaps they can live like you do and your life can be their exemplar for meaning, wholeness, anonymous sanctity and dying without unnecessary fear.

I've been graced to be at the deathbed of a goodly number of ordinary people who died very ordinary-looking deaths, with no choirs of angels silently chanting in the background, no alleluias on their lips, with pain and thirst dominating their concerns, with their hands being tightly grasped by loved ones, and their hearts still very much focused on the pain of leaving this world.

And that's not a bad way to die. In how they managed their deaths they prepared a place for me. Looking at how they died, I am far less fearful and can more readily say: I can do this!

What a grace to have someone go on ahead to prepare a place for you.

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