

Uncertain Steps

Reflections on Assisted Reproductive Medicine

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Towards a spirituality

“The spirit helps us in our weakness...and he searches the hearts of men” Romans 8 vv 26,27

There is a spirituality in all of us which says that there is more to life than ourselves, that there is a meaning to life which is beyond ourselves.

People of a religious conviction would say that that comes from God and that we try to seek God’s will through meditation and prayer. Christians would say that we experience the love of God through the example, teaching and sacrifice of Jesus Christ who is the closest ‘image of God’ that we can possibly imagine. The power of God works through us by the influence, strength and support of the Holy Spirit.

Others, however, while being agnostic or claiming no need for a belief in God, would nevertheless admit to a voice within themselves which questions their existence and their relationships with those about them. How we behave has a direct influence on our lives at the present and that is enough to question our attitudes and to think clearly about the consequences of our decisions.

However we define spirituality it has a profound effect on the way we look at many of the issues which the reproductive technologies raise.

These thoughts, then, are drawn from my pastoral counselling within assisted reproductive medicine and the meditations and thoughts of mine and others. They are offered in the hope that they might bring encouragement, relief and comfort to those who work in or are affected by the new reproductive technologies.

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Prayers and Meditations

“The Lord is gracious and merciful and his compassion is over all that he has made”

Psalm 145 8-9

Why me Lord ?

Why me Lord, why me ? Wherever I go I see reminders- reminders that I am left out. I look through the kitchen window, the neighbours washing line is full, complete,- not mine; the nappies, socks, the party dress and football shorts. But mine ? My clothes, my husband’s too - but on their own. The shops don’t help, We avoid the shelves stacked high with childrens’ things. We dodge the prams. Avoid our friends. Are we being selfish Lord, unreasonable; are we obsessed ? Help us Lord! please help !

Somewhere Lord I remember some words - “Be fruitful and multiply!”. I seem to recall a prayer, the words are misted with time, “Bestow we beseech thee, upon these two persons the heritage and gift of children;” All seemed so simple then - but now it seems a nightmare that will not go away. I’m angry, frightened bitter and resentful; full of shame. Help me Lord! Help us Lord, because I know we are not alone. We share this dream together. You know our dreams, our problems all too well. Help us Lord to share our reality with You! Help us Lord! Please help us!

How *can* you help? The technology is there but does not always work. We’ve tried everything - or think we have - it seems to take so long. Why do you keep reminding us each day? Surely you care? Each month we know for certain we have failed? Time is so short! We have but 13 chances in each year! Perhaps no more than 300 in all! We’ve wasted so much time already. Is it really your will Lord that we should suffer?

Help us Lord to understand, to share, to pray! Help us Lord!

Somewhere Lord I remember you saying “I will not leave you comfortless”. How can You help? I seem to have so little faith in You! But I do have faith in the skills of the doctor, the training of the scientist, the love of the nurse, the care in counselling. Is that where you help Lord? Is that how You show your care? I enjoy my hobbies, is that wrong or are You there with me when I indulge when I am able to relax? Is that what it means to say “Let go Let God”. Help us to understand your ways, your care! help us Lord!

It may never work for us - we know that Lord. We know that human reproduction is frail, that treatment is more likely to fail than to succeed.

But is that really the end? What then? How can we cope? Who will look after us when we grow old? That’s the crunch, the bottom line which we must face.

But how Lord, How? When You were alone, so much alone upon that wretched cross, You felt that loneliness, that true despair. You felt “forsaken” too. Your answer may be our answer, our prayer, our strength.

Those words which were so familiar to you can be our prayer as well, “Into Thine hands I commend my spirit”.

TA June 1990

At times of Loss & Bereavement

We give back to You, O God, those whom You gave to us. You did not lose them when you gave them to us, and we do not lose them by their return to You.

Your dear Son taught us that life is eternal and love cannot die. So death is only a horizon, and a horizon is only the limit of our sight. Open our eyes to see more clearly, and draw us closer to You, that we may know that we are nearer to those who are now with You. You have told us that You are preparing a place for us; prepare us also for that happy place, that where You are we may also be always, O dear Lord of Life and Death.

after William Penn, 1644-1718

A Meditation

“Death is nothing at all ... I have only slipped away in to the next room ... I am I and you are you ... whatever we were to each other that we still are. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way you always used. Put no difference into your tone; wear no forced air of slomenity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together

Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight ? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere near, just around the corner ... All is well.”

(After Henry Scott Holland, 1847-1918)

Moving forward

O Father help us to move forward in these times of
uncertainty to do the work you have for us,

What we do not know, teach us;
What we do not have give us;
What we cannot understand, enlighten us;
What we are not make us.

TA June 1996

“The Lord is gracious and merciful
and his compassion is over all that he has made”

Psalm 145, vv 8-9

The eternal God is our dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms. However much we fall, in life or in death, we can never fall out of his hands.

Going out to meet you, I found you coming to meet me.

A Jewish Poet (quoted on Radio 4 May 11th 1997)

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

A Moslem dedication

A prayer for change

O God,
I bring this situation to you and hold it to you,
refusing to let it get away from you,
believing that by your grace,
in answer to my prayer
it will change,
that something will turn up
that was not there before,
that mountains of difficulty will be removed
or wisdom show me the way to go round
or your grace strengthen me to climb over it
or tunnel through it.
Let me hold on in faith and love,
O Lord my God.

George Appleton

A tribute to an embryo

This is a story about a very early embryo,
full of energy,
full of vitality
and full of potential.

Everything seems to be going fine,
then,
the chromosomes stop marching,
the spindles disintegrate,
degeneration occurs
and the embryo dies.

I wanted to put together some thoughts
to show that doctors and scientists care for these embryos,
and that we share in the bereavement which the parents have.

*Patrick Steptoe (1915-1988)
from an introduction to a piano composition
played at the 3rd Meeting of the European Society
for Human Reproduction and Embryology, Cambridge 1987*

So Small and yet so precious

So small !
Just a few tiny cells.
That speck of life was all we had;
all we had hoped for;
all that we prayed for.

The embryo we had created
had tried so hard
and struggled to survive;
but never did complete its implantation.

Yet still we grieve that death:
the loss was all too real.
For if all had progressed;
if that potential fully realised;
this would have been that child
we dreamed about.

Somehow in ways we cannot now define:
that entity of life is held in love,
in God's most tender care
to be a vital part in his creation.

TA March 1997

Christian prayer of a childless African Woman

Lord, why have you given me a body which does not function like that of other women ? Why have you made me a curse among my kindred ? Who shall look after me in my old age ? Who shall bury me when I am dead ? Shall my name be forgotten after I am buried and my compound be turned into desolate waste ?

These are questions that worry me Lord; but in my anxiety I have forgotten the good things you have done for me. Thank you Lord, for the gift of a healthy body, for a good and sympathetic husband; and above all thank you for making me a Christian.

In my need for a child, my friends have tempted me, my relations have tempted me - either to turn to pagan worship or to break your law of purity - not because they want to lead me astray, but because they love me and would like to see me with an issue of my own. In my difficult moments do not permit me to fall into sin or to lose my faith, for my soul is more important to you than ten sons,

Oxford Book of Prayer p 349

“Letting go” our frozen embryos!

Into Your Hands we commend these few cells.
They are the remainder of those which helped
us seek the family we longed for.

We may no longer need them,
yet still they are alive, their future must be known:
whether to donate,
allow research,
or simply die. We must decide

Help us move forward and wisely act.

And in our prayers -

We send them all our love and grateful thanks.

Amen

TA, July 2003

During times of confusion and anger

Be still and know that I am God !

Let Go, let God !

And if those words are still too long

Our prayer may simply be -

O God !

TA, May 1997

A Gift of Life from generous donors

The cells which make our bodies have diverse tasks,
To see, to hear and walk,
To breathe, and yes to reproduce,
Are just a few.

For us the sperm and eggs and embryos,
Were insufficient
Their vigour far too weak
To make our baby and the family,
So many take for granted.

We grieved the loss of our identity:
Then others more fortunate than us
Gave us a gift of life
To make us hope again.

That gift they gave us,
Of sperm or eggs or embryos,
Had all the real potential
To become our child.

And if it worked,
Their generosity became the family
We struggled to achieve
But never thought would come.

And when it failed,
It helped us realise
That we had tried our all.

We now must settle down
Still looking forward not behind,
To work together and adjust our lives
For all that lies ahead unknown.

TA, May 1997

A Neonatal Loss

You are the spirit in our dream
which we had hoped to be a part of all our life.
Your form seemed perfect yet so small;
those toes and hands we stroked,
that face so clear
hid what we could not see -
those parts with insufficient strength
to work together and to grow,
to join with us in our humanity.

You never had a chance to smile, to laugh, to frown;
or to respond to our affections.
Yet you were real.

The scans, the medications, tubes and wires
and all advanced technology
were not enough to stop your swift decline
into a state of nothingness.

Our picture still so sharp and yet so soft
which strove so hard to change our lives for good
was surely not in vain, and carries on -
a symbol of a love which cannot die.

But life goes on ! I find those words too hard.
there must be more !
But where and how or when
we cannot understand
until united with that love we lost so young.

It seems, right now, too much to comprehend,
that life which hardly had begun
can in God's care have some significance and grow
To meet with us again in his creative love.

(TA, August June 1997)

A Miracle of Love

You are the sparkle that has come into our lives!
That culmination of our struggle
To achieve a family
That magnifies our humanity.

May we for ever mindful
Of that precious gift of life,
Respect your personhood as of itself:
A life to grow and to achieve much more.

Those supermarket shelves
With all that childhood paraphernalia
Which we so carefully avoided
Are now the focus of our attention.

May we respect your growing as a person
In your own right
With dreams which are your own,
But now, for ever joined with ours.

For babies grow into small people.
Not as commodities we have a right to own.
In time they grow through adolescence
Into full maturity as of their own.

May we for ever thankful be
That we are now more completely human.
May we all thrive, surrounded by our family -
That miracle of love.

TA (September 1997)

A Very Special Story

Babies are made when mummies and daddies have very special cuddles - but that doesn't always work very well.

So Mummy and Daddy went to see a doctor who sent us to a special hospital where they had to make you in a little dish. Then when you were a tiny little embryo, only as big as the point of a pin, they popped you back into Mummy's tummy where you grew into our baby.

Christopher was told this story when he was only three and a half years old. The next week they all went shopping in Tesco's - then coming down the aisle was a lady with a pram and a very small baby.

"Hello", said Christopher, "was your baby made in your tummy or in a dish?"

"In my tummy of course!" replied the lady with some surprise.

"Oh how nice" said Christopher "because I was made in a dish. Bye Bye!"

TA (October 1997)

Adapted from a story told by a proud mum.

Some months later Christopher asked his mother "You know you said that babies are made when Mummies and Daddies have special cuddles, and that hadn't worked?"

"Yes" said his mother warily, wondering what was coming next!

"Does that mean you and Daddy don't have any more cuddles?"

"We still have cuddles" replied his mother "But they still don't make babies"

"O.K.", said Christopher and carried on playing with his toys.