

## Old, Bewhiskered Wimp Who Cannot Stand a Little Pain or Beloved Christian Mentor: Stumbling Through the Valley of Death

*By Noel Weeks*

There is something of a tradition of Christians facing death and producing significant reflections. So I wondered what might come out of my cogitations over my recent adventures. What has struck me is the glaring contrast between my human, earthly weakness as a patient and the image that some Christians have of me. Perhaps I can give a concrete illustration of this and then a wider context.

I was taken for a set of scans that involved contorting my body into various shapes. When I walked into the radiation theatre, I was already suffering pain, but walking. I now know that between entering hospital and several days later, several of my vertebrae collapsed. So this was a likely time for reactions to happen. I got up from the scan, whimpering in pain. I could read from the technician's expression and a side comment that he saw me as a bit of a wimp. I returned to my room to my wife Jan who was going through received emails, some of which were testimonies to the blessing of my teaching and our fellowship. Which am I – the wimp or the blessing? Let me then give some sort of a context and then return to the subject.

For a number of weeks I'd been suffering a combination of hip pain and a sensation of full stomach pain making it difficult to eat. I could not get an immediate appointment to a specialist, but our extremely helpful GP jumped in to get an immediate referral. As a result, I was admitted into hospital for a gastroscopy and a colonoscopy on Thursday the 23rd of January 2020. Thus, began our series of ups and downs in expectations. The scopes revealed nothing serious, but the doctors suspected cancer. On Friday I then had a liver biopsy. I returned home in anticipation of seeing the specialist on the following Thursday. However, early Wednesday morning I collapsed with excruciating pain.

The first lot of ambos were unhelpful because my pain was decreasing. They suggested I simply wait it out even though it was decreasing only when I was absolutely still. So from about 5am to 9am I lay rigid imploring, "Please Jesus, show mercy," every time I, unwisely, made a move. By then Jan was able to contact our GP who said to call 000. This time I ended up in hospital and received the news – yes, a melanoma cut out years before had spread. The gastroenterologist encouraged us that the cancer, even though it had spread into the liver but not other organs, was treatable. However, further studies revealed more extensive cancer, e.g. lungs, muscles, bones. Following this, we were encouraged that I may be eligible for an innovative immunotherapy treatment that had already yielded good results. At the time of writing, we are unsure about future treatment.

Allow me then to return to my fundamental subject. When God's delicate balance between constipation and diarrhoea is upset it is hard to refine the balance. Being dependent on nurses to separate you from all the tubes and wires makes winning the sprint to the toilet difficult – eminent theologian??? What about the soiled undercarriage?

And yet my time at hospitals has been rich. I have come across a huge variety of wonderful people. There is something of a migration of Irish lasses one of whom kindly offered to scare me out of my hiccups by her imitation of a Celtic warrior. Oh the great, the magnificent Irish to whom we Australians owe so much. Without the Irish and lower-class English convicts we would have become a race of stodgy Englishmen. Sure, that Celtic tradition can become coarse and vulgar but we need its human reality. Further, that other 'invasion', the sweetfaced Asian beauties! Who can be racist when they are pouring such

natural loveliness into Australia? These are not necessarily Christians, but they reflect the greatness with which God made man. I see my own weakness and earthliness in contrast to the beauty of created mankind.

My experience has also been against the background of the terrible fires. It has been the fires that have brought out one of the great Australian virtues – ‘mateship’ and with it one of the great anomalies of Australia – why will this people who in crisis stick so closely together and sacrifice for each other fall into faction and the fires themselves become a major part of the faction? It is partly because the created commonness of mankind has been overtaken by the desire for prominence. We are ground between the two great millstones of Western society. First, the Enlightenment that said that by knowledge of natural law man could dominate the world and again and again has turned that domination into oppression and cruelty. If that is true all it needs is the application of technology and nature and its fires would be controlled. Second, came Romanticism which reacted against the dominance and oppression of the natural world and wanted man out of nature. Nothing so practical as controlled-burning could come out of this mix, yet the images of people sharing their water bottles with scorched animals give a very different picture of control. Though it is set far away from European images of Eden, there is something beautiful in the picture of the boy beside the dusty trail stroking the wallaby that shares his water bottle. Oh this sunburnt, grey-gummed land – how we love you, how we see the beauty of God in you! We repeat the original sin of Eden. Jumping onto one of these polarities and proving the other wrong makes us wise in our own eyes. So I have laid in bed contemplating the remnant that remains of the beauty of God in creation.

There’s something else I have learned as I came out of an unduly

prolonged scan, wrapped in misery, I said to the harassed radiologist supervisor, “I have heard of roaring in pain, but I have never experienced it before.” She looked back at me with eyes of painful memory, “I have experienced it three times.” I did not have the opportunity to share the Gospel with her, but I pray when I again see pain-filled eyes I may be able to project more sympathy. So what am I? Wise, elucidating or wrapped in my own misery? A final footnote of irony. I have been assisting my dear friend and colleague John Wong in writing a history of Hong Kong, that illegal and immoral seizure by the British in the midst of their campaign to force Chinese to smoke Indian opium in order to reduce balance of payments problems for Britain and British India. (It should be remembered that opium in England at the time, as with Wilberforce, was a medicine dose, not nearly as toxic as the smoked opium the British were introducing in China. This is a separate question, of course, to the rights of present-day Hong Kong people). There is a long history of evil connected to opium, but my prime, present guard against pain is opium-derived.

So what do I conclude out of my experience? I conclude the complexity of it all. My own human weakness and what, nevertheless, God has achieved in my life. I see the beauty of creation including in its human face and its sometimes evil, natural face, how can both of these things be true in the Valley of the Shadow of Death? It is because in that Valley in both our humanity and our glorification we do not walk, but we stumble carried by the One who went through the spine-shattering pain of crucifixion because He came for us and loved us.

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*11 February 2020*