

Assisted Dying



Just before Christmas we had our old dog put to sleep. At sixteen-and-a-half (Jack Russell Terriers are the longest-lived breed of dog.) she'd had a long and happy life, much-loved by all the Baileys. At nine weeks old, a friend sold her to me for £25. I can honestly say that it is probably the best £25 I have ever spent. Lily was worth every penny. She quickly became a best friend to all of us, particularly to my two children. She was always there for them when they needed a cuddle or just someone to chat to who would understand – often when parents didn't. She never refused to take the Vicar for a walk and absorbed huge amounts of information about the Church and the World, helping to put things into context by chasing a butterfly or tennis ball.

The last year saw the slow creep of physical and mental frailty. I've not had to manage a dog suffering from dementia before - staring into space and endlessly wandering around in circles. Added to this, deafness, loss of sight and voice, a growing weakness in her back legs and the 'accidents' of double incontinence, increasingly difficult to manage. The decision to put Lily to sleep was taken carefully, involving all family members. Having collectively agreed in principle that this was the right thing to do to spare our old dog further loss of quality of life, the question then remained as to timing. We needed some space as individuals, and as a family, in which to come to terms with what we had agreed to do before taking the dog to the vet for the last time. We needed some

time too in which to say our last goodbyes. Each of us did this in our own way with extra cuddles, a slow walk around the garden, more biscuit treats. Eventually, we reached a place where we all knew we had each come to terms with what needed to happen. We all understood that having Lily euthanised was the kindest thing that we could do for her. And so, it came to pass.

On more than one occasion I have been faced with someone who has reached the evening of their years and whose sole wish is to close their eyes and not wake up to face yet another day, languishing in physical discomfort with their world reduced to the confines of an armchair. This can sometimes be a difficult conversation to have. But not always. There are times when it is simply waiting for the body to give up, long after the individual themselves has come to terms with the inevitable.

Traditionally, the Christian standpoint has been to acknowledge that all life is a gift from God and that only God has the right to take this gift away. Yet, recent decades have helped us to understand more clearly what it is to die well. The importance, where possible, for the individual to honour the agency that God has given to us in making decisions and choices that holds that in the end all is harvest. Assisted dying, where that is helping someone of their own free will to die well, is a debate that is not going to go away, and one in which we all need to engage with compassion. As someone recently said to me, "Vicar, you wouldn't let this happen to a dog."

Revd Mark Bailey