

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

Many of us now know someone, directly or through friends or neighbours, who is numbered in the 100,000 who have died so far from the coronavirus.

We may well have lost a loved one or close friend ourselves, or know someone who has.

Each day that the numbers of those who have died are reported we notice that they are going up or down – or up and up as I write this.

But somehow the numbers themselves don't really register – what does it mean that 100,000 people have died from this dreadful disease?

And since the first registered Covid 19 death in this country on March 13th there have now been 105,000 “excess” deaths, deaths on top of the around half a million who die from all causes in a “normal” year.

And what is this scale of death that is all around us doing to us?

In World War II the total military casualties in this country for the whole war was about 385,000, and the civilian casualties were 70,000.

So around 75,000 a year, and we have reached 100,000 Covid-19 deaths in ten months.

On a personal level we experience this deeply when someone we are close to dies, a family member, neighbour or colleague.

Two weeks ago as I write I participated in the cathedral funeral at Bury St Edmunds of one of my predecessors as Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, Bishop John Waine, who died of Covid 19, aged 90.

He was in fact the third former Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich to die during the pandemic, with Bishop John Dennis dying in April a month after his wife died, both of Covid 19, and Bishop Richard Lewis died during September.

Bishop John's funeral was of course a Covid-restricted simple service, with just 30 family members and friends.

But it gave the opportunity as moving funeral services do for the reality of what has happened to sink in deeper.

Though Covid-restricted, the service had dignity and beauty, with the music and prayers, words of remembering and celebration, and the deep sense of being held by the God who carries us through these times and holds for us the reality of life beyond death.

Earlier in the pandemic, during April, my father died, of Parkinson's Disease and not of Covid, but of course lockdown had prevented me visiting him in the care home he lived in, and the funeral was just attended by our closest family.

But again, his service, like other funeral services, enabled us to engage with our mixture of grief and gratitude, to process a little more, and importantly to entrust my father and ourselves to God – to make the next step in the journey.

So many people across Suffolk are bearing the loss of loved ones during this pandemic, many dying from Covid 19.

Funeral services are vital for those who are left to take that next step in grief and loss, and to experience that sense of being held and carried through this time by one who is both in and beyond time.

It is important to recognise in our society that how we mark death is a sign of how we value life. The less valuable we hold life to be, the less attention we will give to marking a death.

Funerals and the ceremonies that attach to them are vital to help us give thanks for a loved one's life and to express our pain of a life lost to us, even with the comfort of knowing they are in God's safety and care.

The death of a loved one is hard to bear; it is profoundly painful, and we experience all sorts of feelings – including guilt, depression, anger - and we need help moving through these and carrying that sense of loss, which of course never really goes away.

So maybe it is not surprising that collectively we are feeling numbed by the overwhelming numbers of people who have died from Covid 19.

And I think some of our feelings of tiredness and those senses of sadness and bewilderment that people are acknowledging in this lockdown are part of our collective response to this wave of death.

And we cannot gather together to express our collective grief at this loss, as well as at the loss of a familiar world that is changing so profoundly.

Just as we need personal processes, including good funeral services, to help us face death and see beyond it, including to life beyond death, so we are going to need ways to work through the huge collective grief and anguish as we emerge from the pandemic and the numbness wears off.

As communities, a nation and indeed, as citizens of a global human community, we will need to express our collective grief.

That will mean gatherings, services, memorial events. It will mean tangible lasting memorials – a marker, a plaque, planting trees.

If we don't, the numbness – and unfocussed feelings of depression, anger and bewilderment – will persist, just as they do for individuals who are not able to mark a loved one's death.

We must be thinking now how we might do this for all of our sakes, to truly acknowledge what has happened to us, to express our grief and regret, and to work for a better and safer world for everyone.