

LIVED EXPERIENCE

Living with Cancer

Having been diagnosed with bowel cancer, I found myself having emergency surgery to remove the tumour on October 11th 2022. I do not remember much of this time, but my daughter has a keen memory for dates and detail and is able to recall it all. I didn't have time to think about the cancer. The surgery was a success and resulted in a stoma. I was able to thank my consultant and surgeon for saving my life. How I rejoiced.

In October 2024, I had a further investigation of my lower bowel; alas, there is another cancerous tumour, which required an operation. I remember saying in a hushed whisper – please Lord, not again. Not again.

I had choices. Firstly, to find out whether I would be able to have the surgery, but also was told that because the operation was major, the recovery time would be a minimum of two to three months. I was told that there wasn't any guarantee that my functional outcome would be as good as it was then. I felt that this meant that I may not be able to do what I am doing now, which is to read, write, teach, worship, and spend time with my daughter. As you may already know, we go to our local cosy pub after church every Thursday.

This really resonated with me, but it was a non-starter. I said to my colorectal consultant as graciously as I could that I did not want an operation and that, whether my remaining life be long or short, I wanted to get on with it now. I was also able to tell him that I am 84 and that I have had a good, long life. I had a supportive husband who was loving and cherished me.

I have two talented children who bring me joy. I have tried to make the most of the opportunities that have come my way. I have been aware of many blessings in my life, and I have a strong Christian faith. My daughter raised the question of pain relief, and I was reassured by my colorectal consultant that it is easily controlled and managed. When the symptoms appear, we can call upon Macmillan nurses to support with the appropriate medication. He also said he did not know how long the tumour had been present in the lower bowel, but that it would grow and change.

Driving home from the hospital, my mind was reeling. How would I cope with a cancerous tumour growing in my lower bowel? How would this affect my daughter, my son and the extended family? Would the rest of my life be long or short? Could I call upon the Pastoral team in our church? And the Prayer Circle WhatsApp group? And where was God in all of this?

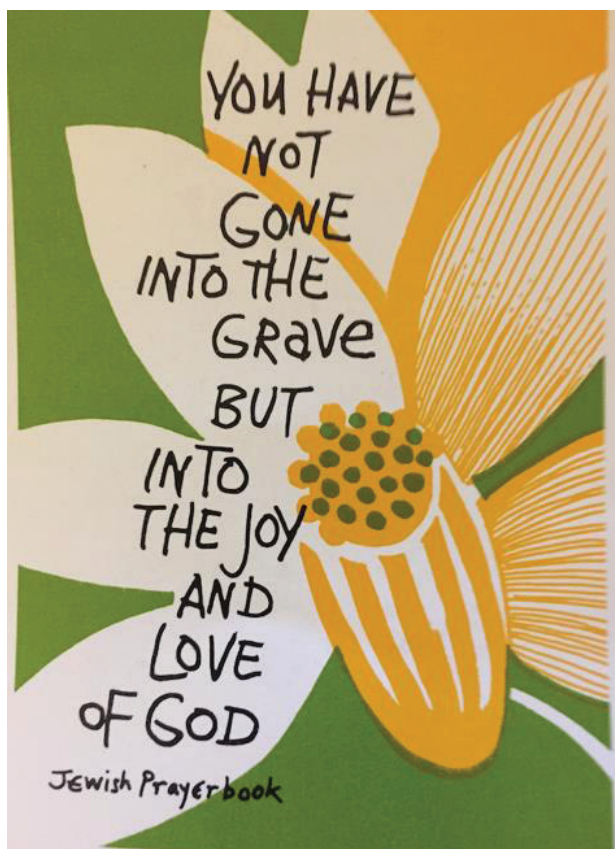
For I know the plans
I have for you,
declares the **LORD**
plans to *prosper* you
and not to harm you
plans to give you
hope
and a *future*
Jeremiah 29:11

Just before Christmas last year, I was talking to one of our church members, a retired general practitioner and a new lay minister. He asked me if I had ever thought of writing about my life living with cancer for our parish magazine. I hadn't. He went on to say that it might help others whose lives have been touched by cancer or their families. I left it at that. I can only say what followed was a series of nudges from a persistent God. I found myself saying, 'Perhaps I could say this, perhaps I could say that, perhaps this might help.' This went on, and I eventually gave in. Several people have said to me, "Keep yourself occupied, keep busy." I am fortunate to read, write, teach, and worship. I am also thrilled that a goodly number of people are praying for me. It is like a balm.

First of all, I am loved and cared for by my daughter. She and I are very weepy people. We laugh and cry openly together. We share our thoughts on eternal life. We talk about heaven and are ever mindful of what St Paul says: that we cannot even imagine what God has in store for us. A heavenly light has just passed over me as I write. It's the sun! She is with me every step of the way, through thick and thin. I thank God for her every day. And, as the prophet Isaiah has promised, 'The Lord God will wipe away all the tears from our faces.'

I have learned that if you have a thankful heart, you are more able to live life in a positive way – in abundance.

My daughter has a lovely singing voice. There is, for me, a moment of holiness in her voice gently pervading the air. There is a beauty here that helps to allay my fears. I delight in her singing, and others do too. My son is a music teacher. His first instrument is piano. I am captivated by his playing, particularly when he swings it with Scott Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag. I love the razzamatazz of it all! His playing helps to take away my fears. I am a lover of sports, in particular cricket and rugby on TV. The cricketers in pristine whites, ready for battle. The rugby players are locked in a fierce rivalry. I can shout, clap and cheer in the privacy of my room. I am taken out of myself. I forget myself.



However, it isn't any fun, wide awake at three o'clock in the morning, alone, when dark shadows creep over me. I try to think of pleasant thoughts. Whilst I miss my husband. I recall Sir Sydney Spencer's words, 'My true love hath my heart, and I have his.' I am comforted. I remember the words on a card sent to me not long after my husband died, 'You have not gone into the grave but into the joy and love of God.' I cling to these words. On

sleepless nights, I sometimes get out of bed, eat chocolate and pour myself a small glass of brandy.

Julian of Norwich's words, 'God did not say that you wouldn't be tempest tossed, but that you would not be overwhelmed.' My words – God did not say life would be easy, but that you won't go under. When I wobble in my faith, I look back on my life following Jesus and say quietly to myself, "I have heard, I have seen, I know."

A friend gave me a bookmark. On it were these words. 'Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.' My known God is my Maker, Creator, Redeemer. To be known by God is breathtaking; to be named by God is awesome. "How great is our God. Sing with me how great is our God."

I was to have a chest X-ray. I was told to strip off my clothes from the waist upwards. Stripping off my clothes, I caught sight of myself in the mirror on the wall opposite. I groaned. Instantly, I recalled a song that we sing in church, 'Lord, change my ugliness into your loveliness.' That evening, back in Picketree care home, I usually have a hot drink before I retire. It came in a large mug. On the side of the mug were two words: Hi Beautiful! The Lord God surely has a sense of humour.

Whenever my faith is tested, I am taken by these words from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'Faith is what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence. Faith "is a passion". "Perhaps we can say," he mused, that "only love can believe the Resurrection." And he added, "What combats doubt is, as it were, redemption." Powerful stuff!

I have a friend who is a priest and a pastor. He recently wrote to me and sent me these words: "May the Lord whom you have known and served, grant to you at the last, strength and peace, until you may, at last, rest in peace and await his coming, in glory, with all his saints." And to you, dear reader, may I leave you with these reassuring words from Julian of Norwich. "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

But they that wait upon the LORD
shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up
with wings as eagles;
they shall run, and not be weary;
and they shall walk, and not faint.
Isaiah 40:31



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Biography



Meg Orr trained as a teacher and later read Theology at Durham University. She devoted much of her time before and after retirement to developing and promoting adult Christian education in her local church. A lot of this work resulted in Meg's book, "Creative Learning in the Local Church", being published by Grove Books in 2005. She was married to Geoff, also a teacher, and has two children and two stepchildren, all of whom are in the teaching profession. She also has three grandchildren and four step-grandchildren. Following bowel cancer surgery in 2022, Meg lives day by day with an

ileostomy. In October 2024, another tumour was discovered in the lower bowel. Meg chose not to have surgery in her 80s but rather to get on with living her life while she is still able to do as much as she can. Meg writes regularly for her church magazine with articles published monthly. Mobility has brought many challenges, and Meg decided to reside in residential accommodation two years ago. She continues to worship in church with her daughter and gets out and about frequently, including the odd glass of vino at her local pub.

This article was previously published in the magazine of St Mary and St Cuthbert's Parish Church, Chester-Le-Street, Co. Durham, United Kingdom.

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