

*“With a steady and honest purposefulness, this book takes us through a succession of earthquakes, literal as well as metaphorical – the shattering impact of a cancer diagnosis, the up and down moments of living under this shadow, and then an unexpected death – then the aftershocks of grief and loss, and the trauma of a real earthquake in New Zealand. But what comes through is a clear-eyed faith, a sense of what cannot be shaken, a stability that is credible because it is hard-won and a faith-filled embrace of the risk and limitation that is inseparably part of our human identity before God. Jo Cundy is a sure-footed guide through some very dark places; I’m grateful that she has been brave enough to map her journey in this way.”*

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury

*“This is a memorable book about a memorable journey. It’s wonderfully honest and beautifully written, without sentimentality but with tenderness and grace. Jo Cundy’s strong faith is evident as we are drawn in to experiences which are both deeply personal and yet universal. There are lessons about life, death and new life from which we can all richly benefit.”*

Bishop John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford

*“Letting go of someone who becomes terminally ill stretches our humanity to its extreme. Even more so when that person is a life partner, a leading public figure and someone with a deep trust in the goodness of God. Yet Jo Cundy recounts an extraordinary story of faith with deep humanity and engaging hope.”*

David Wilkinson, Principal, St John’s College, Durham

*“Jo Cundy has written a deeply moving and inspiring account of the journey she made with her husband Ian from the time he was diagnosed... until two years after his death. Jo traces the eighteen months between Ian’s diagnosis and his death with extraordinary honesty, but also with humour, wit and finely drawn observations.*

*“It is a story that anyone who has ever lost a close loved one can immediately identify with, but it is also an adventure story about life, love and God.*

*“As Jo experiences intense grief, she also faces her own mortality and eventually finds herself able to accept the gift, as well as the fragility, of life.*

*“Jo Cundy is a person of immense spiritual, emotional and physical courage, and her story will inspire and encourage anyone who has ever lost a close loved one, as well as anyone who has ever questioned the relevance of faith to the meaning of life.*

*“Letting Go of Ian is an intensely moving personal account of the death of a beloved husband, but it is also an inspiring story of how one woman makes new and hopeful discoveries about life, God and herself.”*

Christina Rees, author and commentator

*“This very helpful book is about living deeply. The honesty with which it is written is both refreshing and challenging. Letting Go of Ian invites the reader to ask searching questions about their own journey and relationship with mortality.”*

Bishop Victoria Matthews, Bishop of Christchurch,  
New Zealand

# Letting go of Ian

*A faith journey through grief*

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*In memory of Ian,  
and the rich years of marriage and  
ministry that we shared*



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## *Foreword*

Caroline and I first met Ian in 1988, when he was Warden of Cranmer Hall at St John's College, Durham, and I was about to start training for ordination. We left Cranmer at the same time; he went off to be Bishop of Lewes, and I started as a curate in Nuneaton. We had a couple of holidays together, and Ian was invariably supportive and wise in numerous conversations about everything from leading a parish to what to do next. His friendship was a crucial part of my own development in ministry, something that was true for a huge number of ordinands and clergy in the Church of England. As the years went by we managed to find ourselves in more or less similar parts of the country, and kept in touch.

Ian and Jo went together in all that he did. Their ministry was joint: they worked very hard, and it was impossible to imagine one without the other. For those of us who knew them both, the loss of Ian was a tragedy. For Jo, it was of an entirely different order of magnitude and this wonderful book is the outcome. It is very much an Ian-and-Jo book,

even to the last words being Ian's. Yet as always with Jo there is not a trace of the sentimental or maudlin. It is crisp and matter-of-fact, transparent and carefully shaped in its account of what being widowed meant, and in its careful yet penetrating narrative.

The penetration is all the more powerful because it comes not from purple prose or emotional passages, but from the narrowly and intensely observed experience of a journey. For me, two events shape the book. The first is, of course, Ian's death. The second is the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, which found Jo in the cathedral escaping by the narrowest of margins as the tower crashed through the roof under which she and her cousin had been standing moments earlier. Through these two events, and in Ian's words in the last chapter, Jo reflects on what it means to come to terms with our own mortality.

All of us are touched by death, inevitably our own at the end. Most people avoid facing its reality until it bursts in on us. Ian and Jo lived with the reality of his mortality, and after his death Jo has reflected profoundly and practically on the impact and consequences. She has done so without the slightest element of cringe, and certainly without self-pity, and the degree to which the book moved me is a reflection of her skill in drawing us into the journey she is travelling and the way in which the reality of God's presence is demonstrated. Again there is no sentimentality, let alone a sense of diminishing the sense of loss.

Loss catches us by surprise in so many ways, and so does comfort. When I became Bishop of Durham, Jo and

the family gave me the indefinite loan of Ian's cope, mitre, chasuble and stole, given to him at St John's College by the students, when he became a bishop. They are a stunning and unusual design by Juliet Hemingray. Every time I wear them (and by the grace of the cartoonists they have become somewhat iconic) I am surprised by the sense of missing Ian, but also by the sense of the providence and continuity of God. One wants to hear his voice and his wisdom, but also one knows that the God who called him is faithful. Loss and comfort are fellow travellers.

Through the book I was constantly surprised with Jo at the ways in which she found the presence of God catching her by surprise, whether in a trip to Taizé, or recovering from the earthquake on the west coast of New Zealand. The story of the journey reminded me of the reality that we plan our lives in straight lines across level country, yet we live them in blind corners, steep hills, dark forests and crooked paths. Strangers meet us, even strangers we have known well but whom we rediscover in fresh ways. Most of all, when we least expect it Christ is there, as comforter, guide, deliverer and saviour.

This is not only a book about bereavement, in many ways it is not even principally so. It is a call to renew our sense of purpose, of a journey with a beginning, a history and an end. It sets before us the reminder of the call, not only for clergy but for every human being, to be a pilgrim, a companion, a purposeful traveller to an assured home.

*Justin Welby*



# Setting Out

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*It is autumn 2011 and I am sitting in the conservatory of our home in County Durham, looking down Weardale at the view that Ian loved, and setting out to reflect on the journey of the last four years, to draw together some of the threads of the unexpected pilgrimage that Ian and I found ourselves walking together.*

---



## *I'm a Questioning Pilgrim*

“**B**ishop in cancer scare” – a newspaper hoarding in Peterborough’s Cathedral Square highlights one of the realities of public life, that if you are a diocesan bishop you cannot have a private illness. Clergy life, by its very nature, is public to some extent, and episcopal life is even more exposed, so that there is a fine balance to be found in seeking to be “private in the public arena”. Indeed this is a problem faced by so many people who, to a greater or lesser extent, have a public aspect to their life, be they teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, media celebrities, or the like. It was something I had lived with all my married life.

Ian had been Bishop of Peterborough for eleven years, and we had become embedded in the diocese and the three counties that it encompassed. Now we were facing serious illness and an uncertain future, with implications that might be not just physical, but also emotional, mental, and spiritual – implications that might have an impact on family, work, and home; and thus the two parts of our world, the

two levels on which we lived, were about to collide. We were embarking on a journey where our private experience would inevitably have to be shared in the public arena, a journey through terminal illness, bereavement, and beyond.

This is a journey faced by so many at some time in their lives, and is a familiar story, but through it run various persistent and important questions, because when God intervenes dramatically in our lives we often find ourselves being challenged to answer some of the most basic questions in life, both for ourselves and for people around us. These are the “Oh God!” questions; the “why?”, “what?”, “how?”, “when?” questions.

So I want to begin the story of this journey, this “pilgrimage” story, by suggesting that it may be worthwhile to pause and outline some of those specific and inevitable questions which underlie it as the story unfolds. (Or, dear reader, you may prefer to skip through this “preface” and return to it later!)

*Why does God allow those moments when life changes totally?* Oh God, why? For me, in the course of a four-year span, God would intervene dramatically three times with memorably life-changing moments: first, the medical diagnosis that we all dread; then the bereavement that pulls the rug from under your feet; and then an unexpected near-death experience. They would be “determining moments” with a before and after, and each prompting the agonised question, “Oh God, why?” Each of us has these “determining moments” in our lives when something happens, or we make a decision, take a specific action, or in some way the course of our life is



changed radically. They are milestones on our life's journey, milestones, perhaps, in our faith journey. Sometimes and rarely, as for me, they come in a rush, all at once, and leave us rather breathlessly trying to catch up with the new landscape and the new horizons around us.

*Does having a high public profile make a difference?* Ian, like most bishops, was involved in a wide range of commitments, both locally and nationally, so that General Synod, Church Commissioners, Council for Christian Unity, St John's College in the University of Durham, the House of Lords, and other bodies, all featured in his diary along with diocesan groups and committees, local civic events, and the daily pastoral work of caring for his clergy and people. Every area of this life would be affected. But how?

*Does being in a faith-based job make a difference?* Clergy are by definition people of faith, and they are called to serve and to live out that Christian faith in their daily life and work. Now Ian and I were facing one of the biggest challenges to that faith – the mystery of life and death. How would, could, and should, Ian bring this into his vocation and public ministry? What would be the expectations of other people and how would we relate to them? What about doubt and darkness of the soul?

*What do we mean by "healing"?* The other big challenge to faith that Ian and I faced was to understand what God's healing might mean in practice. We believe in a God who has power to heal and to save, a God who can work miracles. So should we look and pray for the simple solution of a miracle that would take all traces of the tumour away? Or would

healing encompass body, mind, and spirit in a more holistic way? How would God answer our prayers? Would we have to learn to pray and trust God day by day, symptom by symptom? How would the church around us share in this process of seeking wholeness from God?

*What about the impact on the family?* It was not only Ian and I who had to face this challenge, but also our children, and the wider network of family members. The impact on each person and their reaction would be different so that there would be both a sense of “togetherness” and yet also of “individuality”. And as the journey continued, the individual perceptions and experience of it would begin to vary and diverge – so how do you care for the differing needs of spouse, child, sibling, and others?

*How can you be private in the public arena?* Demonstrating emotion was not something that came easily to Ian and me, both being identified as “introverts” when we did the inevitable Myers–Briggs personality analysis; our natural mode was restraint. But there are always moments in life when we have to expose our vulnerability, let down our defences, and share our deepest emotions with others. We would need God’s grace to know when it was right to do this publicly, when to be not just “the bishop and his wife”, but fellow Christians on the journey of life.

*What is my life all about now?* This is the “what next?” question – the need to make sense of a changed landscape on life’s journey and find a new path. When Elijah is in the wilderness escaping from the wrath of Jezebel, God asks him, not once but twice, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

*I'm a Questioning Pilgrim*

(1 Kings 19:9, 13, NRSV) and as one looks at that story, God's question raises other questions: "Where have you come from?"; "Where are you going?"; "What are you learning along the way?" In the same way, both Ian and I needed at different stages to discern God's purposes for us.

So many questions, and so many unknowns to be explored. As so often in life, answers would really only appear through experience as our story unfolded. Ian and I were pilgrims, journeying in faith. And over a short period of about four years so much happened, and the pace of life did not slacken. There was laughter and grief, joy and sorrow, moments of the totally unexpected and even bizarre, and God-given touches of glory. Keeping up with God and with the twists and turns of the journey was sometimes challenging and R. S. Thomas's words from his poem "Pilgrimages" came to mind: "He is such a fast God, always before us, and leaving as we arrive."<sup>1</sup>

Journeys are a wonderful metaphor for life as we look at its ups and down, its twists and turns, its joys and disappointments. If we are wise we take time to enjoy the landscape around us, to notice the details, to listen, and to learn. If we are lucky we may share the journey with congenial and interesting companions, or meet people along the way, and there may also be times when travelling alone may be a preference or a necessity. If we are sensible we know we will require sufficient stamina for the journey and appropriate resources, but often these may be limited and we may have to know that enough is enough. Journeys vary in length and the goal may be clear or obscured, the route

well-trodden or new territory. And there is also a sense in which each person's appreciation of a journey is individual and personal – there are things that only they have seen, heard, felt, and experienced on the way, and rather like a witness in a court of law, their perception of details may vary from that of fellow travellers.

Ian and I embarked on our journey together, onto an unfamiliar path, aware of the final end, but without guidance or route map to show the way; a journey to be shared with family, friends, and colleagues; with the diocese, the church and the wider world; with strangers as well as intimates. This journey would be a balancing act: a private pilgrimage shared with many travelling companions, and yet a public pilgrimage which hid a private grief. John O'Donohue, in his book of blessings entitled *Benedictus*, writes that "a journey can become a sacred thing",<sup>2</sup> and when a journey takes on the attributes of a pilgrimage we find deeper, spiritual significance, especially as we look towards a destination that may or may not have been chosen, and may or may not be welcome.