

# A Premature Goodbye— Is It Really the End?



By Simon Williams

**A**shes to ashes, dust to dust!', Jane<sup>1</sup> shrieked as the curtain drew round before the coffin. Her beloved husband and best friend, Stephen,<sup>1</sup> had been snatched from her at the age of only 43, his body destroyed by an aggressive cancer diagnosed barely five months earlier. They had been together for twenty-three years.

It was standing room only in the Chapel of Rest. Friends, family, and work colleagues unexpectedly brought together to pay their respects. I was ushered into a corner near the front exit where the mourners would file out. Surveying the scene of subdued faces, I could sense the pained expressions as people fondly recalled their memories of Stephen, and then pondered why it had happened to him.

Originally a chef, Stephen later worked with vending machines on

London Underground and became a technical expert. It was in this role that I had worked with him over a period of seven years. Always pleasant, always likeable, always with a 'can do' attitude, Stephen was willing to go above and beyond to install and maintain machines in the rugged subterranean environment. In the early days he had played a pivotal role in the team which installed nearly 1000 machines right across the network, reaching almost every station. Sometimes he

would work for three days and nights without a break to get the machines in place. For years night shifts had been the norm. Yet he found time to share himself with others, to help and support them, to have a laugh, and to look after Jane and the horses they together delighted in keeping. His eulogist described him as 'an ideal friend'.

But now it was all gone. The vending machines had been consigned to the scrap heap a couple of years before, victims of the 'de-cluttering' needed to cope with increasing passenger numbers. The vending team had been disbanded. Now brought back together one last time, it was clear their lives had taken very different paths. Stephen had taken voluntary redundancy and worked part time for a friend until his illness. One former colleague had set up a property-development business which had sadly collapsed in the 'credit crunch'; another was supplying plumbing and solar heating, also struggling in the economic downturn. Only one remained in the vending industry, providing stock for machines at Heathrow Airport.

Stephen's hobby was visiting the battlefields and graves of France and Belgium, learning what others had sacrificed in the cause of freedom. It was fitting, then, that Stephen should be laid to rest on the 90th anniversary of the Armistice. Yet so sad that he also should now be numbered among those whose lives were taken prematurely. As we observed the two minutes silence, I pondered the question 'Why?' The pained faces around indicated no one had an answer.

But then my thoughts returned to some of the words cited in the funeral service:

- 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'
- 'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.'
- 'In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.'
- 'For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

Could there be an answer after all, somehow, somewhere, some way? Could there be something more than Stephen's few years of life? Could he and Jane yet have a future? I resolved to investigate further.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Not their real names.

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