Continued from previous page

and death. They are my only subjects, even if I cannot fully trust in the promise that an all-powerful God has an actively benevolent presence in the world. . . Whenever I have been asked about it publicly, I have tended to hide behind Thomas Carlyle's idea of a life of doubt enriched by faith."

> "Neil is, as we like to say in our family, 'a proper priest'

But, as he writes, the consolations of Christianity arrived "from the most surprising places" after Marilyn's death, and were palpable. A friend sent a text, quoting Psalm 34: "God is close to the broken-hearted." His "feisty, no-nonsense drycleaners" sent a condolence card saying that they were praying for God's grace: "As one day gives way to another, so may darkness give way to light, sadness yield to joy, and despair surrender to hope in you."

Pastorally, the couple were supported by the Revd Neil Gardner, a friend and a minister at Canongate Kirk, in Edinburgh. In spite of the Covid restrictions, Mr Gardner came to the house before Marilyn died.

"We talked quite naturally and easily about the funeral service as if we were preparing for some kind of party," Runcie writes. "Neil understood. He'd done this before, He is, as we like to say in our family, 'a proper priest', serious and compassionate, kind and funny."

In the end, there could be just 11 people at the funeral which took place at St Monans, in Fife, on the headland looking out to the Firth of Forth. There was a piper, and psalms of the sea. It was another year before "the full theatrical production" of a memorial service with hundreds of mourners, once again conducted by Mr Gardner. "And it was absolutely the full show," Runcie says.

BACK in 2020, Runcie was in the middle of writing his most recent novel, *The Great Passion*, about Bach and the composition of the St Matthew Passion. "It's obviously about the music of love, suffering, grief, and consolation. And at the same time as I was finishing it, Marilyn was dying," he says. "My daughter Charlotte said, 'Do not tinker with that book, because it will finish you off.' But of course, I did."

Somehow, he completed it, and the novel was published to critical acclaim earlier this year. But now he thinks he needs a break. "What I'm trying to do now is write something that isn't so emotionally wrecking, just an entertaining crime story set in Scotland in the 1840s. Something that doesn't do my head in." He yearns for a sabbatical "to read more and think more and listen to music and just not have to write".

There's still music he struggles to listen to. "Last Christmas, I went to the *Messiah* at Wigmore Hall. And that was absolutely disastrous because it was so beautiful. It was like hearing the music for the first time: it had this incredible freshness, and dynamism, and it was absolutely beautiful. And it's hopeful, of course, the *Messiah*: it's all about my childhood and my faith and the loss of Marilyn.

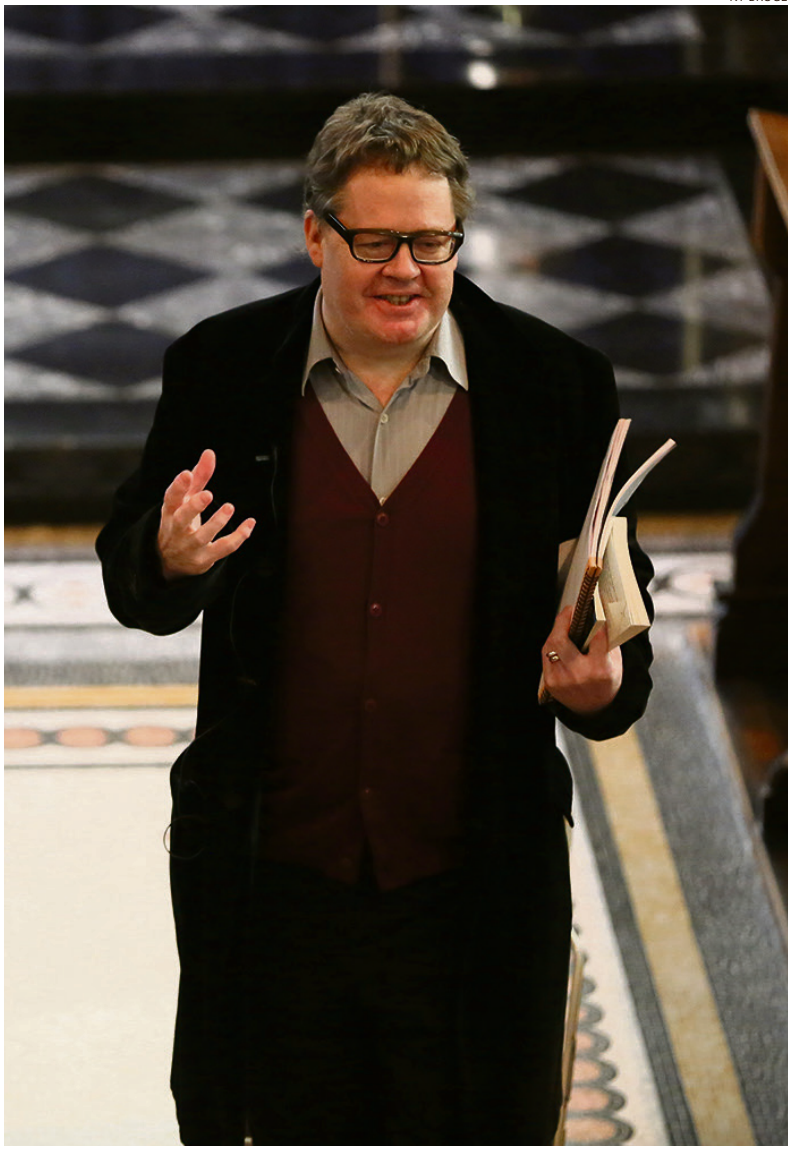
"And at the interval, I thought I can't go back in, but I did. I did, and then I couldn't leave the seat, and it was just because it was wonderful as well as completely terrible. It was also utterly wonderful because it is the most vital energetic, wonderfully resolving piece of music and it keeps coming, piece after piece, aria after aria. It's just fantastic."

Can he bring himself to listen to Bach? He has to ration himself, he says. Bach at Advent and Christmas is one thing; Good Friday another.

When we met, he was looking forward to Advent Sunday. "I said to Lucinda: 'I want to go to church on Advent Sunday,' and she said: 'Where do you want to go? Would it be Canterbury, by any chance?' and I said: 'Yes. Yes, of course.'

"I like darkness and light. I want to go to a church where there's darkness and candlelight, and then the light coming into the world. And that will be very moving, and I will cry."

KT BRUCE



James Runcie at a previous *Church Times* Festival of Faith and Literature

James Runcie will be in conversation with the tenor James Gilchrist at the Church Times *Festival of Faith and Literature faithandliterature.hymnsam.co.uk*

'Not a bloody roller coaster'

SHORTLY after the diagnosis, a friend *who is a psychiatrist* told us that we should make sure we "make the most of the precious time there is left".

I told him that Marilyn and I didn't actually *need* a terminal illness to enjoy each other's company. *All* our time was precious. In another telephone call, he said that I could phone him 'whenever you like' but that "Saturday afternoons are best for me".

It's difficult to know what to say in these situations but I thought psychiatrists were supposed to be good at this sort of thing.

A friend in America emailed to say how shocked she was. She had a friend with MND in Bristol. Did I know him? Maybe she thought the diagnosis gave us access to its every victim.

Nurses with experiences of MND warned us that the disease was "like a roller coaster" but, as the illness progressed, I thought, No, it's not. It's nothing like a roller coaster.

Stop saying that. But all the professionals kept coming out with the same phrase, as if it were a mantra or a prayer or a way of filling the silence with a fact. "Like a roller coaster".

Sometimes they added the word "journey" for extra effect.

"The journey's like a roller coaster."

"NO IT ISN'T," I kept wanting to say. "We're not going on a journey at all. We're stuck in this flat in Edinburgh in the middle of a lockdown. It is NOT A JOURNEY. And, more importantly, IT IS NOT A BLOODY ROLLER COASTER EITHER. With a roller coaster you have ups as well as downs. The ride is thrilling. With this disease there ARE NO UPS. It is down all the way and it is NEVER thrilling. Try to find some other metaphor. And, while you're at it, you might as well learn from us not to come out with such crap to your future patients."

But I didn't ever say this. I just replied, "Yes, I suppose it is." I sat on a sofa with the girls and said, 'If anyone tells us that we're going to come out of this stronger, I'm going to kill them."

"MND," said Rosie. "The disease that brings families closer together."

Dr R said, "I'm sorry. You wouldn't wish this on your worst enemy."

"Well, I don't know," said Charlotte. "I wouldn't rule it out. Maybe one day I'll meet someone really awful."

If it was "like" anything, it was similar to the myth of Sisyphus. No matter how far we pushed the stone up the hill it was always going to roll back down again.

Another friend, who is a therapist, sent me a text. *How are you?*

Three words that take under three seconds to write, requiring an answer that takes far longer. I have come to despise this phrase. There is an immediate answer. *Fine.*

Coping.* And there is a more hostile response too: *How the fuck do you think I am?

What those caring for the sick need *least of all* is more work; more explanation, more *things to do*. To answer a friend's "How are you?" takes time if you want to do it properly.

Almost as bad is "I wish there was something I could do."

Well unless you are prepared to help with the shopping, the feeding, the washing, there isn't anything really.

I translated the phrase "I wish there was something I could do" into "There's nothing I can do" or even "There's nothing I am prepared to do."

All these remarks put the onus on the recipient.

Tip: "Thinking of you" is better. As is "Do not reply. Just to say that I know it must be impossible. I am sending all my love."

Or this: "James. Call any time if you want to, but not if you can't. Any time. Day or night. I mean it."

This is an extract from* Tell Me Good Things: On Love, Death and Marriage *by James Runcie, published by Bloomsbury at £12.99* (Church Times Bookshop £11.69)*; 978-1526655448.

Listen to an interview with the author at churchtimes.co.uk/podcast