



## Living in the present

The death on Wednesday of BBC radio presenter Rachael Bland, aged 40, was cruelly premature. The way she lived out her last years was, though, inspiring.

She was diagnosed two years ago with cancer and was one of the unlucky ones for whom the drugs did not work.

In her podcast, "You, me and the Big C", she and two other women experiencing cancer described how it was shaping their lives.

My listening to stories of how Bland addressed her last months interlaces with my own experiences in the parish visiting a middle aged woman with a terminal diagnosis.

What happens is that you will be told your diagnosis is terminal; you may also be told that this will last weeks rather than months, but doctors cannot give an exact prognosis. This is a practical reality, rather than anything of principle: doctors simply do not know how long you have to live.

Listening to this woman, she describes what a strange way of life it now is. In her case, she's done the key preparations: she's made a will, she's contacted loved ones (who've visited from America where necessary), we've even planned out her funeral. And yet she's still here.

Of course, she's living in considerable pain, at least from time to time until doctors get to readjust her

dosage and her medicine. But she's also having some beautiful encounters. Rachael Bland spoke in her last months of just enjoying being in the garden with her three year old son. I won't go into what my parishioner has said, but she has spoken of similar times of just being with her family, and deriving enormous—I wish I could remember the word she used—for it was more than pleasure: something closer to contentment, but the sense was deeper than that word.

In each case, what these women are experiencing is only what we all do, just massively intensified. For all our lives on this earth are temporary and time limited; we naturally have targets or hopes or ambitions, but looking to the future should not distract us too much from the present. It feels like the art of living in the present is something they are able to do, perhaps better than most of us for most of their lives.

Sadly, on Tuesday, in St Mark's we hosted the memorial service of another woman who died too soon. The family prepared memorial cards with this thought from the poet Henri Frederic Amiel.

"Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the journey with us. So, be swift to love, and make haste to be kind."

It's a beautiful sentence: too often hastening is associated with tasks; we should associate it more with love. Often we move in haste; but that haste is not always directed to the right end.

September 2018, for the Train is a short column by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at