

My cancer is part of God's purposes

FACING up to death isn't easy - especially if you're still in your 20s.

Martin Ankers had to think about his own mortality when he was told he had cancer in both his liver and lungs. It was the second time he had been diagnosed with the disease, and he was told that this time it was probably terminal.

At best, he would undergo intensive chemotherapy to reduce the size of the tumours, followed by two complex operations to remove the cancerous cells. Even then, there would be a one in three chance of the cancer returning.

But his faith was strong enough for him to contemplate death as the chance to be united with his Saviour, and his illness as part of

my faith

As part of our series on lives changed by faith, we meet cancer sufferer Martin Ankers

God's ultimate plan. It gave him a peace and a reassurance about the future that could only be described as supernatural.

Previous experiences meant that he hasn't felt angry with God for letting it happen, or fearful about the future since he was diagnosed with secondary cancer in September 2003. But that doesn't mean it's all been plain sailing - there have been difficult times too.

"I remember very clearly saying that I wasn't scared of dying,

because it meant I would get to heaven earlier," he said. "That would be a better place, because I'd have a perfect body again. I was scared of the sickness and diarrhoea that can be caused by chemotherapy, but I've now had six doses and come through it incredibly well. I haven't even lost my hair!

"I can't plan any further than July this year, when I'm determined to be best man for a friend's wedding. I do have a tendency to pray for peace and reassurance rather than directly for healing.

"There is a danger of becoming fatalistic about it, but part of that is that it's hard to see how I could be of any use to God, to a potential wife, or as an engineer, with half a lung and half a liver."

The 29-year-old chemical engineer from St Jude's Church, Southsea, was tested for epilepsy 11 years ago after some seizures at university.

He received prayer for healing and was convinced that God had done so. When he was diagnosed with mild epilepsy in the summer of 1993, he became quite angry with God for not healing him.

But he can now reflect on passing his Masters degree with a first, getting a good job and the prevention of seizures through medication. His epilepsy meant he could talk to others about similar problems, which helped him to understand that God could use his illness for a purpose. That experience stopped him from becoming angry when he was diagnosed with bowel cancer in February 2002.

"I accepted the cancer diagnosis so calmly because I thought: 'I must have this for a purpose'," he said. "A verse like 'in all things God works for the good of those who love him' kept coming to mind.

"It turned out that several churches and scores of friends had been praying for me. I only felt scared once, and that was when I was asking for prayer for a 'shopping list' of



Martin Ankers: handed his fear over to God

items to do with the operation practicalities. I was anointed with oil and realised that I should be praying for peace. I handed over my fear to God and genuinely felt a peace that passed understanding.

"Despite a difficult operation in which I lost six pints of blood, I awoke to find a temporary ileostomy bag fitted rather than a permanent one. I was out of intensive care in three days, out of bed in four days and out of hospital in 10 days. The pathology labs found the local tumour had been very aggressive, but had been fully removed.

"Later, to my surprise, I actually found myself writing a thank-you prayer to God for my cancer - how else would I have been able to understand and pray for the complexity of emotions bouncing around the heads of others diagnosed with cancer?"

Martin was able to accept both his epilepsy and his cancer as part of God's plan for his life. He was pleased that his mum and dad had started going to church and that they were impressed with the number of people praying and caring for him. But when a routine scan last September revealed secondary cancer in his liver and lungs, it was

harder to take.

"It was two days before I was due to exchange contracts to buy my first house," he said. "I didn't feel angry with God, but I did feel frustrated. Since then I've had six doses of chemotherapy, and I know I have some difficult battles ahead, including possibly two dangerous operations. There have been some undulations in my faith journey since then - spells of feeling close to God and feeling spiritually dry. But that's normal for many people."

Martin has now launched a website - <http://ankers.webspace.fish.co.uk> - to explain the illness and treatment from a patient's perspective, and to deal with issues of faith.

"What has helped me most is the Bible - verses leapt out of the page at me that I'd hardly noticed before - good Christian books, worship, the practical care of friends and family and the realisation that Jesus suffered pain and was scared of dying in Gethsemane.

"I've been able to talk to people about my faith and about death, which suggests that I may have this for a reason. After all, if Christians automatically had easy lives, how could we appreciate and pray for the pain that others go through?"



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