

Life, Death and Tears

A sermon on John 11: 32-44; Revelation 21: 1-6a & Isaiah 25: 6-9 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 November 2024

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Message

Christ's grief gathers up our griefs and achieves the promise of a day when tears will be no more.

Sermon

I don't know if you noticed, but there were tears in all three of our scripture readings tonight. Tears of grief and mourning over the deaths of loved ones. One of the readings contained that most famous of bible verses, "Jesus wept."

All Saints Day is a day when we stop and remember those who have gone before us and passed on the flame of faith to us. Some of those who we remember were personally close to us and while we look back with fondness and thanksgiving, the remembrance is mixed with grief over their loss. They are no longer alongside us, and their absence hurts. All Saints Day may well bring tears.

We followers of Jesus have had a somewhat uncertain relationship with grief and tears. Some Christians will tell you that it is not appropriate to grieve over the death of a Christian. "Those who die in Christ have gone to be with Christ. They have been promoted into resurrection life and everlasting joy, so we should be happy and rejoice in their victory over death."

Indeed, in the early church, one of the most obvious differences between Christian funeral practices and those of the Roman world around them was that in a Christian funeral procession everyone wore white instead of black and sang hymns of praise to the God who triumphs over death. But is it true that our faith in Christ's victory over death banishes all grief and tears?

Some of those who argue that it does would find support in our readings from the prophet Isaiah and the Revelation to John. Isaiah says "The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces," and John's revelation says that "God himself will be with them; and will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

But on the other side we have our reading from the Gospel according to John telling us that when he turned up at the funeral of one of his close friends, "Jesus wept." And if you think about it for a moment, you will realise that grief is not all about what we think is happening to the person who is gone. Go and stand around for a few hours in the international departure lounge at the airport and it will become perfectly obvious. Families who are farewelling a loved one who is leaving forever for a better life in another country are not all smiles and joyous celebration. There is grief everywhere. People are crying, dogs are howling, roofs are leaking! And nobody has even died. Why? Because grief is about loss, our loss.

No matter how wonderful we believe the life *they* are going on to is, *we* are losing them and our lives are the poorer for their absence. Even if we can celebrate their good fortune, our grief is still real and raw and worthy of tears. A hole has been left in our world, a hole we will live with for the rest of our lives, and we will weep over that hole. And yes, Isaiah and John do

speak of a day when tears will be wiped away and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, but they do not say that that day has come. It may be on the horizon, but it is still a promise that is yet to be finally realised. “Jesus wept.”

But I think there is a bit more to the story of Jesus weeping than that. Something that is related to our experience of grief, but also something more and different. Maybe it already occurred to you to wonder about it. You see, John’s account of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus makes it quite clear that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. It was just before we picked up the story tonight, but Jesus told his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” So, if Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus, what is he crying about? There is no Lazarus shaped hole that he is going to have to live with for the rest of his life. He knows Lazarus will be up and about in a few minutes time.

Well, the simplest and most common answer is probably at least partly true, and that is that Jesus is grieving over the continued intrusion of death into God’s good creation. Even though this particular death will be reversed, at least for a time, Jesus still grieves the existence and continued impact of death. He feels the pain it causes people and is angry at its continued capacity to tear people apart and devastate all that it visits. I’m sure that is true, and there are plenty of other places that similarly describe Jesus’s compassionate identification with our pain.

But there is something else too. Something that I think in this situation was unique to Jesus: a grief that was his alone. You see, just after we left off the story tonight, John records that it is in direct response to this incident, this raising of Lazarus to life, that the chief priests and the Pharisees held a council meeting and decided that they had to have Jesus killed. Raising Lazarus to life was the trigger that set off the chain of events that led to Jesus being killed. And he knew it would. He knew what this was going to cost him.

If you’ve read CS Lewis’s book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, you will remember that after the Lion, Aslan, has committed himself to offering himself to be killed in place of Edmund, he becomes sad and moody and depressed. He goes off his food and becomes withdrawn and morose. Well you would, wouldn’t you? Just because you’ve accepted your death it doesn’t mean you welcome it.

This is the same story. Aslan was saving Edmund from death, but only by resigning himself to walking to meet it in his place. Jesus is saving Lazarus from death, but only by resigning himself to walking to meet it in his place. And in this little story, we are seeing a snapshot of a bigger story: Jesus is saving us all from death, but only by resigning himself to walking to meet it in our place. And so, Jesus wept. And well he might. And well might *we* all weep.

Yes, there is a promise of a day when tears will be wiped away and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Clearly on that day we will be reunited with our loved ones and with the whole communion of saints who have gone before us, for how could every tear be wiped away and every grief banished if we were not. Yes, great will be the rejoicing when that day comes. But between here and there, between now and then, there is still a road of tears to be trod.

The good news is that, in Christ, our griefs are gathered into his grief, and thus our griefs participate in his grieving, in his redemptive weeping, in his offering of himself for the life of the world.

In our prayers shortly, we will be naming some of the people who form the cloud of witnesses who have inspired us to follow them in following Jesus. And after that, we will gather around the table of the Lord, remembering that we do so surrounded still by that cloud of witnesses. But for now, it is only a taste of the glory to come, a sip of the first fruits. For now it is not going to fill those holes that various people have left. But here at the table, even our grieving, even the mix of fondness and sadness that our remembering brings us, even our brokenness, is gathered into Jesus's wholeness so that all of it is offered to God in the quest to bring that day soon.

Grieve freely. There is no shame in it. Grieve in protest against the lingering presence of death in the world. But offer your grief to God, so that in Christ, all grieving may be offered in the cause of calling the dead to life, once and for all, so that all may be one again and every tear may be wiped from our eyes, and death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things will have passed away and all will be life.