

Sermon Archive 143

Sunday 2 April, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 11: 1-45

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I was nineteen when my grandmother died. She was my mother's mother. Since Dad's parents lived in Northern Ireland, and I'd never met them, and since my mother's father (whose ring I wear) had died when I was much younger, this was the death of my most familiar, most significant grandparent. She died at home, in her bed, of a heart attack, while waiting for my uncle to bring her a morning cup of tea. I can't remember who told me the news, but it was probably my father, by phone, from the school where he taught. Mum had been informed, and had gone to my grandmother's house straight from her place of work. I was alone at home, being a university student with no lectures on that morning. Feeling that being at home, doing nothing, seemed not the right thing to do, I decided to walk down the road to St Andrew's Church (where at that time I was being pious and keen – and being nurtured in faith), to tell someone what had happened. On the roughly fifteen minute walk, I imagine my mind was full of thoughts about my grandmother – whom I loved – but I can't remember much about what I was thinking. I do remember that it was a sunny day, and that when I got to church I told the minister what had happened, and he offered to come and visit us that evening. It was a fairly matter-of-fact conversation. I don't remember any emotional intensity at all. In fact, the whole thing was slightly strange in that regard – emotionally "suspended". I loved my grandmother; I realised that she had died. I remember the day being sunny, and the thought that I would have to buy some black clothing for the funeral. But I don't recall any emotional reaction.

Walking back home from church, the battered old 1952 Hillman Minx that got Mum around town pulled up beside me. I opened the door, got into the passenger seat next to my mother. There were no words, but I noticed

that she was crying. So I cried too.

They say that tears are contagious. That's a good, slightly medicalised way of putting it – a verbal-culture coping-mechanism. Another way of putting it is that it hurts to see other people's pain – especially when those other people are people you love – and more especially when there's nothing you can do about the pain they're suffering. So we just cry together. That's what we do – and supremely, importantly, and blessingly, that's what we do.

The story of Jesus, Lazarus, Martha and Mary, begins with the announcement of some very bad news: Lazarus is really sick. And we are told that Jesus loves him – loves him dearly.

Jesus begins the process of responding to the bad news by talking about God's glory and how it can be revealed. He acknowledges that the situation is serious, but does so in a way that feels like he's on top of the situation. There are things that he can do. There are problems that he can solve. There is no current need to panic. He seems quite confident, and deploys no emergency response. In fact, he stays doing what he's doing for a further two days. Even when eventually he arrives in Bethany, he's talking about things that he can do, religious points that he can make, "faith lessons" he can teach. When he's met by Martha, he's very much solid in the role of the teacher, the manager, the controller. He's totally composed. This situation has unfolded as an opportunity to do the kind of awareness-raising stuff that God often does. It's OK that it's happened. It's all OK.

Then he sees Mary – and he sees that she's been crying - and that the people around her – good people - have been crying.

We are told that he was deeply moved, and that he, himself, began to cry. You see, Jesus believes that God can do wonders. He goes there to make a point about faith. He goes there as someone convinced that he can do something helpful – pretty soon. But he can't help the fact that already people have been crying. Already the way that God has chosen to work through him has caused people to weep. At the sad edge of what God has not yet done, or possibly cannot do (un-do the sorrow already

experienced), Jesus weeps. At the sad edge of how people have suffered *in the meantime*, at the time before God has had a chance to do typical, magical “God stuff”, the people have cried. That’s when Jesus becomes the One who cries.

The picture on the front of your order of service is of a statue in Oklahoma, in the United States. It stands on the former site of the Alfred P Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma – a building destroyed in 1995 by a bomb planted by one Timothy James McVeigh. 168 people died in the explosion. (Timothy also is dead. He was executed by his government in a Texas Correctional Facility on 11 July 2001.) Before that happened, the statue was erected by the congregation of St Joseph’s Catholic Church – a neighbourhood church which was also damaged in the explosion. Descriptions of the statue have Jesus turning his back to the ground zero of the explosion. It is said that this Jesus can’t bear to look towards it. And he’s weeping.

What good does that statue do? It doesn’t bring back the lives of 168 dead people. It doesn’t change what has happened. It makes no practical difference at all.

I guess that maybe, at the time of the explosion, the church may have done some practical things in response. It may have opened its doors to people seeking safety. It may have poured cups of tea, and given people a place to go. It may have provided space for medics to treat casualties. These all are helpful, confident offerings in response to a tragedy. But none of these measures could change what had happened. Nothing they did could stop the people from crying. Nothing they did could alter the suffering that had happened *in the meantime*. That is beyond what the church can do; it is beyond the “God stuff”. The people, inevitably, are going to weep. So, they erect a statue of a crying man – and they call it “And Jesus Wept”. They tell a story of the God-man not being able to change the fact that Martha, and Mary (and all the people who love them) have been hurt – and that they’ve been crying. They tell the story of the man, who on the edge of what God has not been able to prevent, simply weeps.

-ooOoo-

O, cheer up, you . . . gloomy preacher! Haven't you noticed the miraculous ending! Now that Jesus is onsite in Bethany, things are looking up. All that confidence that he had at the start is coming to bear on the stinking corpse of Lazarus. Life is going to win the day, and all who see it will believe – and give God the glory! It'll be OK! Focus on that, and stop depressing your congregation!

-ooOoo-

The trouble is, O critic, that I **know** my congregation. I know that there have been times of deep sorrow for most of them. (Disappointments. Defeats. Losses. Bereavements.) And I know that whatever consolation faith might have provided for them, whatever good news might have been spoken for them (in love) at those times, still they have suffered (suffered) in the meantime. There have been days when there have been **no** miracles, and the only thing they've been able to do is cry. That's been real.

And although it may not be of much practical worth, it is somehow very important for them to know that, beyond the things that God has and has not so far been able to do, and the grief that has come in the meantime, Jesus is **one with them** in their weeping. The One they follow and worship hurts **with them**. ("And when human hearts are breaking, under sorrow's iron rod, then they find that self-same aching, deep within the heart of God".) That part of the story may in fact be as important, and as much classical God-stuff, as the rest of the story. Solidarity Empathy! Fellow-feeling! The welcome sharing of contagious human tears! - - - Jesus weeps.

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I was nineteen when my grandmother died. She was my mother's mother. I loved her. Jesus visited my house, and wept with us. In sorrow, he showed us the closeness and compassion of God. Amen.

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