

Lent 5A The Raising of Lazarus 26/03/23

This morning let's consider together what is often called the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." The Gospels tell us that Jesus wept on just one other occasion. According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. Presumably, he wept because that city, like so many of our cities today — cities like Sydney and Melbourne and Brisbane - was filled with people unwilling to embrace the reign of God which Christ came to inaugurate. So he wept over the city. Here in John's Gospel the circumstances are different. After learning of the death of Lazarus, Jesus began to weep. The question I want to invite you to ponder this morning is why — why did Jesus begin to weep?

Part of the reason Jesus wept may have been simply because Lazarus was his friend. That's what those standing near the tomb thought. They looked at Jesus, saw him crying and said, "See how Jesus loved him" (John 11:36). Don't you wonder how Jesus felt when he first received word that his friend Lazarus was ill to the point of death? It's a hard word to hear when the doctor says to you, "I'm sorry, but there's nothing more we can do." It's a hard word to hear when they say to you, "I'm sorry, but your loved one has at most a few months left to live." It's a hard word to hear when you learn that a friend has cancer.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, meets Jesus and says to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Later, their sister, Mary, comes out and says the very same thing, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). When Jesus asks, "Where have you laid him?" they say to him, "Come and see." Then, when faced with the reality of Lazarus' death, Jesus begins to weep.

Perhaps Jesus wept, even as we all weep, because he felt that a part of him had died as well. Don't you suppose that he had an emptiness deep inside, a hole in his soul, which would not soon be healed? How hard it is to hear the word that a loved one has died: hard even to go to sleep at night. It's hard to hear that a loved one has died, hard even, says this scripture, for the Son of God. For, you see, Lazarus and Jesus were friends.

Something that the crowd asks hints at another part of the reason Jesus wept. They asked, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:37). The simple answer to that question is No! Not even Jesus, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, could keep his friend from dying, for sooner or later death comes to each of us. No matter how much we avoid it, no matter how much we evade it, no matter how many medical miracles our doctors perform to prolong our life, sooner or later death comes to us all. Of course, some people like to say, "Yes, but it's different for Christians — for Christians there is no death." But that's nonsense. It's simply not true. Try to tell that to the widower who has just lost a spouse of 47 years. Tell it to the family in which a child has died. Tell it to anyone who has lost a loved one - that there is no death - and they will look at you as if you're crazy. Death has a certain finality to it, which we simply must acknowledge and admit. Do you remember the famous scene at the end of Shakespeare's King Lear, where Lear carries his dear Cordelia into the room, knowing that she is dead, but hoping against hope that she is not? He holds a little mirror up to her mouth and says: "If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, why then she lives." But in the end, the finality of her death hits home and the king says, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never."

Never ... never again to hear the voice of your loved one. Never ... never again to observe your loved one doing those little things that always endeared him or her to you. There is certain finality to death that we simply must acknowledge, the finality that Jesus must have felt when he learned his friend Lazarus was dead. No wonder that Jesus began to weep.

May I suggest another reason why Jesus may have wept at the tomb of Lazarus? This reason may not be obvious when you read the eleventh chapter of John, but it becomes obvious when you view the Gospel of John as a whole. For in some symbolic way the death of Lazarus is a prelude to Jesus' own death. In fact there are some similarities:

Jesus is troubled and weeping. He cries out with a loud voice. There is a tomb not far from Jerusalem. The tomb is a large cave with a stone across the front of it. The stone is rolled back. There is the mention of grave clothes.

What are we talking about here, the death of Lazarus or the death of Jesus? The similarities are striking. Through these similarities, John may be making an important theological point — namely, for Lazarus to come out of the tomb, Jesus must enter a tomb; for Lazarus to live, Jesus must die; for Lazarus to believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, Jesus must first go to the cross. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus comes face to face with the impending reality of his own death. No wonder that Jesus, standing outside the tomb, began to weep.

Yet, here is the Good News. Here is our Christian belief in life after death. On another occasion in John's Gospel Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). It's as simple as this - if Jesus had not died on the cross and then been raised from the dead, there would be no truth to his words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25). But since he did die, even as we all must, and since God raised him from the dead, then there is eternal life for us as well.

By the way, this eternal life is not just what will happen in the hereafter, but also by the grace of God what can happen in the here and now. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins. Have you ever thought of eternal life like that - not just what happens when life ends, but also what happens when you begin a whole new life living in the gracious presence of God through Jesus Christ?

Yes, Jesus wept, and we can all weep with him because death is real and it is personal and it is painful. But at some point our tears of sadness are transformed into tears of gladness, because of him, because of Christ. Thanks be to God who gives us this victory, even this victory over death!

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