

Grief and Darkness ...

... But God is there - the Light shines in the darkness

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday before Advent, 31st October 2022 – by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster

Lamentations 3:22-33; John 11:32-44

So, as I am sure you know, tomorrow is Halloween, or All Hallows Eve, and this begins our church's season of remembering, with All Souls and All Saints, and then Remembrance Day, and more recently, a series of memorial services reminding us that, unlike the popular funeral poem, death and dying are not nothing at all. During this season, we find space and have rituals that help us to find light in the darkness. Traditionally, people would have lit candles and put them on graves. Nowadays, it's perhaps more common to see lights inside a pumpkin. But the readings we heard earlier reflect the themes of this season, the time just before Advent when we truly begin waiting for the light in the darkness. In this season, we're invited to remember, to feel, to allow space, to reflect on our own times of darkness.

Lazarus was the brother of Martha and Mary, the best friend or one of the close friends of Jesus. And despite the pleas and cries from Martha and Mary to come to his sick bed, Lazarus dies. He's placed in a tomb, mummified, wrapped up, anointed with spices. And we hear this verse, commonly known as the shortest in the Bible, "Jesus wept" - Jesus began to weep.

And for me, this places a full stop in the middle of the narrative. The shortness of the phrase is meant to grab our attention and to make us pause, because there are so many situations where our only response can be tears; tears of compassion; not neat Christian answers; or even practical solutions; but a moment to recognise the darkness. The darkness of Lazarus in the middle of a tomb.

Over just the last few months, I have spent time with people who have been directly affected by the war in Ukraine; others whose son has committed suicide; someone whose daughter is trapped in life-destroying addictions; friends whose dreams are thwarted by repeated cancer; a marriage in the process of being wrecked by infidelity; a young teenager in care, sectioned for psychotic behaviour; passionate hopes of becoming adoptive parents, crushed by delays in court.

I could continue, but you will have your own stories, perhaps personal ones, perhaps those happening to those that you love. You will know those moments, perhaps days, weeks or

even months of sitting in the tomb, of knowing nothing but overwhelming darkness. But for those of us who seek to support, we don't need to explain the darkness. The call is simply to sit with, to be with, to weep with, to reach out a hand into the darkness and wait with.

I have a very, very good friend who I've known through the church for many years. The friend who she and her husband are on their fourth lot of cancer in the past ten years. And I am the friend that she can swear with because she knows I'm the one who won't be shocked when the only response to the latest situation is some words that I'm not going to say in this space. But actually I'm in good company, because Martha does similar when speaking to Jesus. Jesus. We have such lovely, sanitised language in the Bible, but what Martha actually says to Jesus as he approaches, and this is going to be my new phrase for all dismal situations is: "*He stinketh.*" Lazarus had been decomposing in humid Middle Eastern temperatures for four days. Some of you here will have smelt, decomposing bodies. And 'he stinketh' is a marvellous phrase. That foul-smelling mess is what so many of us know in some of the situations we see in our world today - hundreds of young people crushed at a party meant to be celebrating Halloween. And sometimes we just need to call it what it is: '*This stinketh.*'

Our reading in Lamentations similarly doesn't try to dress up and neatly explain away the dark and pain of life. It speaks of sitting alone in silence, even as a young person; of putting one's mouth to the dust - it stinketh; of putting one's cheek to the smiter, taking the insults. There is nothing dressed up here. Darkness is real. And pain and suffering and evil don't neatly disappear for people of faith.

But there is hope. Lazarus returns to life, a glorious foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus, the ultimate triumph of good over evil and life over death. A powerful reminder that God is in control and present, however dark the situation even when we can't see him, feel for him, or even cry out in prayer for him.

My friend, who I speak to to swear with, has an amazing team of people who have prayed for her and her husband through the past few years, especially when they had no words left themselves. Lamentations reminds us that even after the darkest and longest of nights, there will be morning. God's love never ceases.

You may feel as if you are in the midst of the darkness this very evening; you may be supporting a loved one as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Let us be unafraid of the silence.

May we hold on to the certainty that God is there, holding us in the darkness, feeling our pain, weeping with us and for us; that his love is unceasing and there will be morning. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

Reading Texts

Lamentations 3: 22-33

²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. ²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. ²⁷ It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, ²⁸ to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, ²⁹ to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), ³⁰ to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. ³¹ For the Lord will not reject forever. ³² Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; ³³ for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

John 11: 32-44

³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."