

## **Sermon for 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2024, Year B, All Saints Day**

**Preached at St John Baillieston**

**John 11:32-44**

### **Sermon**

Three years ago, at this time of year, an old university friend of mine called Richard was fighting a battle against bowel cancer. At first it seemed like surgery had fixed the problem, with chemotherapy to catch anything the surgeons missed. And being an IT guru, he gave all his friends on Facebook daily updates and photos, and we went on the journey of 12 chemo sessions with him. We cheered him on, willing his blood-count to be up to the task of each dose, counting down each hospital visit until the final day arrived and then looked forward to good news from his oncologist, hoping and praying for the all-clear.

There was no all-clear. There was another tumour, in an even worse location, inoperable. But still hope. They would try a different chemo. He just needed to get a little stronger.

He didn't get stronger. The tumour pressed on a nerve and no pain relief was quite equal to the agony, not even morphine. My friend stayed in good humour though, posting funny jokes on Facebook through the endless nights of insomnia.

More surgery followed, this time to sever the nerves transmitting pain, and we cheered him through this as well, and appreciated every photo sent from his hospital bed, even though he looked a year older every time, with lengthening beard and hair worthy of Samson.

Three years ago this week, he was moved from the hospital to a hospice, a much more peaceful place, with a view from the window and a room to himself – just for a few days to recover his strength. But the tumour removed his ability to

keep food down, and after months of publicly documenting everything several times a day, Richard posted a single short message on Facebook reporting difficulty in swallowing, unable to quench his thirst.

He died of course, a day or so later, and in the months that followed, those of us who bore witness to Richard's journey all struggled to figure out how to respond to this suffering of a good man whom we respected, admired, and loved. Just like Richard himself, most of his friends are atheist or agnostic, or believe we rejoin the energy flow of the universe when we die. A few of us believe in eternal life with a loving Creator. None of us wanted to offend each other with our beliefs or say the wrong thing. None of us wanted Richard to give up too soon or miss the chance to say a proper farewell.

Many of us here have been through the experience of losing someone we loved, whether parent, sibling, partner, spouse or even child. It rarely if ever feels just and right when a human life ends. What do we say to God when our fervent and desperate prayers for healing go unanswered? What does it do to our faith?

Into the maelstrom of emotions that many of us experience at this time of year when we particularly remember those we have loved but who are no longer with us, comes the realisation that today's gospel reading is the raising of Lazarus from the dead, a story which begins with Jesus having delayed visiting his friend when he was sick, so that he might perform an even greater miracle when he had died. If I'm honest, it feels a bit cold – Jesus let his friend die apparently so he could demonstrate divine power over death.

Fortunately, Mary and Martha don't let him get away with that. God the Son is forced to confront the entirely human grief in Mary's blunt cry of loss. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". In response to her weeping, the Son of God is silenced, deeply moved, and himself brought to tears. I find I don't much care about the miracle. But thank God that Jesus weeps.

For centuries, Christian theology was influenced by Greek ideas that a perfect God cannot be emotionally troubled or moved by anything, as this would be a sign of imperfection. All all-powerful God cannot be subject to emotion, so the pure logic of the philosophers goes.

But the people who believed this also needed to figure out some other reason for Jesus' divine tears. So, some theologians split Jesus into two parts, with his weeping being a human response, while the divine Christ remains unmoved, incapable of such weakness. Others argued that Jesus is not really weeping for Lazarus who he knows he will raise from the dead, but because of the unbelief of the bystanders who fail to understand who he is or his message of eternal life. One of the Church Fathers even suggested that Jesus was weeping as a rhetorical ploy, to arouse sympathy in the crowd.

None of these ideas admit a much more moving possibility, which is that Jesus Christ's direct experience of the grief of losing a friend and his weeping alongside Mary and Martha show us God's true relationship to the suffering of his creation. In Jesus, God fully participates in and shares our suffering, our anger at injustice, and our pain at all the loss we endure, and though he promises in our earlier reading from Revelation that one day all will be restored to perfection in a New Heaven and New Earth – for now he weeps with us. God responds to our pain by kneeling alongside us and suffering it too.

Those of you who attended the Stations of the Cross service we held here on Good Friday earlier this year may remember the beautiful sonnets written by Malcolm Guite for each station. When I read them, I am always most moved not by the final poems about the Crucifixion or even the Resurrection, but by sonnet nine, when Jesus falls for the third time:

*He weeps with you and with you he will stay  
When all your staying power has run out  
You can't go on, you go on anyway.  
He stumbles just beside you when the doubt  
That always haunts you, cuts you down at last  
And takes away the hope that drove you on.  
This is the third fall and it hurts the worst  
This long descent through darkness to depression  
From which there seems no rising and no will  
To rise, or breathe or bear your own heart beat.  
Twice you survived; this third will surely kill,  
And you could almost wish for that defeat  
Except that in the cold hell where you freeze  
You find your God beside you on his knees.*

There is a name we give to people who have come to realise before they die that nothing can separate them from the love of God, neither pain nor suffering, nor things present or things to come, neither life nor death. These people we call saints. They are the ones, who, having encountered God weeping alongside them, will dare everything for the love that God has shown us. So, today we celebrate the lives of all the saints, and that includes all those who we have loved and who now rest in peace, and it includes you, and even me.