**Revelation 21.1-4   
John 11.32-44**   
**4th November 2018**

## Jesus wept

*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen*.  
  
The French philosopher, Albert Camus, talked of death as the ‘dark wind blowing from my future’.   
  
This last week has seen both the feast of All Souls and All Saints. Next week is Remembrance Sunday. The leaves are falling, and the year is on the turn. It’s November and our thoughts, guided by the lectionary this morning, turn to the theme of our own fragility, even our own death.  
  
So, we find ourselves back in Bethany, that village on the outskirts of Jerusalem which seems to have been a second home to Jesus because of the hospitality and friendship of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It was usually a place of respite and laughter. Yet death is the great ‘interrupter’ and today Bethany is frozen in grief.  
  
There is anger and accusation in today’s story. That’s, in part, because Lazarus, who we presume died before his ‘time’, has now been in the tomb for four days and it seems inexplicable why Jesus didn’t come sooner.  
  
Martha joins in with the criticism in verse 21: Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died…  
  
The traditional understanding which explains this delay is that in raising Lazarus Jesus will glorify God.

Although that may be true it’s a rather cruel use of this family’s loyalty to make them go through such a horrid time even if the ultimate outcome was eventually to be positive.

Maybe we just don’t know the exact sequence of events here. Maybe John does his best to explain it away. Maybe, just like any other death in history, it occurred when it did and how it did with those witnessing it feeling powerless.  
  
Today, it can still be a feature in our bereavement to ‘blame’ someone, and that’s often God, for the loss of a person we love.  
  
‘If only’… if only God had stepped in, if only the car wasn’t going so fast or the doctor had been quicker off the mark.

I read this week of that idea we might have of the perfect time to die. It’s those years lodged between ‘why did she have to die so soon’, and ‘why did he linger so long’.   
  
Yet, there simply isn’t, of course, a perfect time to die. But that is not the same as saying there cannot be a ‘good death’. Enough time to have said farewells, time to express gratitude, time to think of death not as the enemy but, in the words of St Francis of Assisi as ‘thou, most kind and gentle death, waiting to hush our latest breath’. One of the gifts that the hospice movement has brought to society is providing a loving and supportive environment for both the one who is about to die, and their family, in which to share those final days, quietly and compassionately supported and held by medical staff.  
  
Yet death is not always expected and neither does it inevitably come with dignity, as the worshippers at the Synagogue in Pittsburgh experienced last week and as people who have been told of a terminal illness this week will have discovered. In the words of Camus, that ‘dark wind’ can blow into our present at any time. It often comes abruptly and finds in us an unwelcome response.

So, in Bethany there was an anger that led to the accusation that Jesus should have done more to stop Lazarus dying in the first place.  
  
And then there was crying and grief.  
  
In a message to the people of New York after 9/11 the Queen said: *Grief is the price you pay for love*. I think it’s probably the most profound thing she’s said during her long reign. And in today’s passage it becomes clear that Lazarus was much beloved – he was loved by his sisters, his village and by his friend Jesus.  
  
All cultures deal with grief and express funeral rituals differently. In East Africa we learnt it’s a punishable offence if you don’t attend the funeral of someone in your village – which means every service has about 800 people present.  
  
Jesus stands outside the tomb of a beloved friend and does two things which brings me great encouragement. First of all, John has him say these words: I am the resurrection and the life.

My old college principal came back from a funeral one day in quite a mood. In chapel he told us why – the officiating minister had never once proclaimed at the service that Jesus was the resurrection and the life. Ever since I’ve always felt my college principal on my shoulder at funerals, and I’ve never once taken a funeral service without using these words of Jesus in the liturgy.  
  
The second thing Jesus does is cry. ‘Jesus wept’. Isn’t it significant that the compliers of the New Testament thought that was enough of a statement to make it into a complete verse. Verse 35 of John 11. Jesus wept.  
  
Other gospels have Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because he is so frustrated by the disbelief around him, and maybe something of that was also playing out in Bethany too. Yet isn’t the focus of the grief-stricken tears just the love that Jesus had for a dear friend, alongside all the pain Lazarus’ family have endured because of his passing.  
  
Grief ripples out from the centre. Immediate family members will be told first and might even have been present when a loved one died. Children and grandchildren will soon be told and might have to deal with bereavement for the first time. Friends will hear the news and send cards. And as all these parties gather for the funeral so the service becomes a corporate time of both thanksgiving and mourning.  
  
So it was at Bethany. This was a whole village event. Jesus seems to be aware of that. The atmosphere is full of sadness and Jesus weeps.  
  
Jesus shows us the ‘Christlike God’. The God who carries our burdens and shares our tears. Not a detached and stoical God, but a loving Father God who feels our sorrows and enfolds us at our lowest moments in his compassion.  
  
And finally, in this morning’s passage, there is also life and service.  
  
Jesus does something very wonderful – he calls to Lazarus by name. ‘Lazarus come out…’ Isn’t that a moment to cherish.  
  
In the mystery which is death I like to think, especially at a Communion Service like todays, of the Church, militant and triumphant, the Church on earth and in heaven joined together in praising God. That’s the reason for that line in the liturgy: So, with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, we proclaim the resounding hymn of your glory….  
  
I like to think that, as Paul says, whether we live or die, God calls us by name and offers us his life – just as Jesus summoned Lazarus from the tomb by calling his name that day in Bethany.

He offers us his life right now. He calls us, Ian, Mary, David, Carol…he calls you and me to share his risen life right now. I am the resurrection and the life, said Jesus. Right now, in the here and now, he calls us to live that life of love and service.  
  
And then, in the words of a much loved funeral prayer, as the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, he calls us again as he welcomes us into his nearer presence.  
  
Isn’t this the essence of All Saint’s tide, that as those who believe in Jesus, the resurrection and the life, we have strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.  
  
We held our Life and Faith group at The Manse on Wednesday, Hallowe’en, the eve of All Saints. And we were discussing a chapter from our study book on the theme of death and several folks shared their experience of being very close to death. Without exception their response to almost dying was to value life with a deeper gratitude.   
  
Victor Frankl, the Austrian holocaust survivor, [neurologist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurology) and [psychiatrist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychiatry) said much the same thing after being pronounced clinically dead before recovering. He writes: *Suddenly everything gets precious, gets piercingly important. You get stabbed by things – by flowers and babies and beautiful things, just the very act of living…suddenly there are miracles everywhere.*

I wonder how Lazarus felt the day after, the week after, the year after this life-giving moment in Bethany? Did he too, see miracles everywhere.  
  
What we know is that just a few chapters further along in John’s gospel we meet Lazarus once more, this time serving at table. He was now using his life to bless others and by serving them he was serving God.  
  
What went on at Bethany – the sudden death of a loved one is not so very different from what will have gone on this week in Birmingham or Berkhamsted.  
  
And what happened to the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus will also have happened in your family too.  
  
At every funeral, as I confront the mystery of death and anticipate my own passing, I’m constantly drawn to Jesus on the cross and his words to the penitent thief – today you will be with me in Paradise.  
  
And at every funeral I say these words, not just to honour the memory of my former college principle, but because I believe them and rest in them, words from today’s set gospel:  
  
*Standing outside the tomb of a beloved friend Jesus said: I am the resurrection and the life.*  
And so on this All Saints Sunday I willingly join my voice here on earth with the praise I believe is going on in heaven, sung by people I still love and care for. That, I believe is part of the Christian hope which is ours.  
  
God calls us all by name and invites us to share in his life in both this world and the one to come.  
  
May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen  
  
*Ian Green, Amersham, 3rd November 2018*