**

Revelation 21.1-4
John 11.32-44**
**7th November 2021**

## Death, Loss and Hope

*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*.

Recently the Church has observed All Souls and All Saints Days and next week, it will once again be Remembrance Sunday. And so, as the leaves continue to turn gold and fall, our thoughts turn to the themes of life and death, loss and hope.

In our gospel reading this morning 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 and the sister’s sense of loss is simply overwhelming.

A few weeks ago one Tuesday at LunchBreak I introduced some musicians from Dr Challoner’s Grammar School and as I did so I realised we had not had any schools visiting the church for the last year and a half. The Pandemic wiped out the LunchBreak programme and where once there was music there has been eighteen months of silence. It still feels such a loss. The loss of welcoming these students, the loss of marking their progress and the loss of sharing with them in the joy of music. Time we’ll never get back, so how wonderful to be able to restart these lunchtime concerts and share with these student musicians once again.

A sense of loss, in that moment when we feel nothing but a void, brings grief, even anger. It was there in Bethany, in today’s scripture.

Accusation is in the air. 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 that 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…*
Maybe we just don’t know the exact sequence of events. 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.

There is sometimes said to be a ‘good’ time to die. It’s those years lodged between ‘*why did she have to die so soon’*, and ‘*why did he linger so long’*. But Lazarus didn’t die in that ‘in between time’, he simply dies much too young.

When Jesus finally arrives at Bethany he stands outside the tomb and we are told in verse 35: ‘he weeps’. 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, no other words were needed in the shortest verse found in all scripture: *Jesus wept.*

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.

The sense of loss in today’s gospel is palpable, so where’s the sense of hope?

Well, what happens next is prefixed by a saying of Jesus that is read out at most Christian funerals. Jesus said: *I am the resurrection and the life*.

Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb by name and he is raised.

Whenever John includes dramatic events like this in his gospel they are meant to be read as signs. Signs that point the reader beyond issues like: how did it happen and in what order, to a consideration of a greater and deeper truth behind the action.

Lazarus’ resurrection itself points to the rising of Jesus. And the theme behind all of this is that God is Life. God weeps at death and rejoices in life. And that needs to be the heartbeat and the pulse of every church – we are ‘for’ everything that brings life.

So, this side of the grave we long, pray and work for peace. We see mission in terms of both body and soul.

And then when death comes how do we keep hope before us and what do those words of Jesus: *I am the resurrection and the life*, mean to us at a crematorium or graveside?

As I’ve pondered today’s passage in preparing today’s sermon I’ve realised afresh three ways that hope comes into my own heart at times of loss. Three ways the Holy Spirit’s life touches mine when I mourn someone who has died.

At a funeral service many of us value the tributes that are given. At that moment when their death seems over whelming we recall their life. We love to hear of their childhood formation, their journey into adulthood, stories of love, of career and mention of interests that sustained them and ideals that formed them.

I’m always touched, if the person we are remembering was of senior years, if the family reproduces a picture on the order of service of when they were younger – as if to say: today we are recalling a whole life.

Recently I officiated at a service here in church and I was touched by the tribute paid by a grandson. He recalled that whenever life got challenging his grandpa would just say one word, ‘steady’. Now, the grandson said, that’s what I hear myself saying, I think of him and say ‘steady’. The gift of his grandpa lives on in his own life, and he shares that gift with others.

It’s as stories are told and tributes are paid that something so valuable, that is now past, can actually inspires us for the future, for, to coin a phrase, ‘We all stand on the shoulders of giants’.

Secondly, as we mourn I sense the presence of God comes to us through the gift of each other. We are mourning ‘together’. Of course, there will be moments of private grief, and there needs to be. Yet we are also grateful that together in family, church and community we can talk of the ones we have loved and lost.

God’s hope so often comes our way through community, sharing with each other, supporting one another and in these moments we are blessed.

And finally, in saying farewell to a loved one at a funeral service I’m profoundly grateful for the words of hope spoken in that final commendation, in a way it encapsulates our sense of trust in God.

It’s that moment when the minister commends our loved one into God’s hands, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, trusting in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the middle of one wintery March night, as the snow was falling, we stood by a window at the Birmingham Children’s Hospital, having just entrusted our son into the hands of surgeons because he had peritonitis. He came out of the operating theatre four hours later and spent the next two months recovering. But for a time we could do no more for him than commend him into the safe hands of those who could bring him healing and wholeness.

And so, I think, one of the most important parts of any funeral service, is that time of Commendation, when we, as it were, hand our loved ones back to God. They have been our companions on earth, and we now commend them into safe and loving hands, the hands of a welcoming God of love.

Our prayer is that even at times of loss, we might, in God’s grace, be people who live with *strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.*
May it be so, in the name of Jesus, who says to us all this morning: I am the resurrection and the life. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 2nd November 2021 All Souls’ Day*