

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 1st November 2015 10am

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John 11:32-44

³²When 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.'

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'³⁵ Jesus began to weep.

³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

³⁷But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

³⁹Jesus 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 for four days.'

⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'

⁴¹So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.'

⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'

⁴⁴The 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.'

Sermon

'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. He will be alright.'

'Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.'

'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Denial.

Blame.

Anger.

All the familiar patterns of responding to death.

To the stuff that life throws at us.

To the things we would rather not face.

If anything is certain in this life, it is that we will all face death.
The death of those we love.
And, eventually, our own death.
And, like all human beings, we will try to pretend it isn't happening.
We will cast around frantically for someone to blame.
We will get angry with God.
Why?
Why did you allow this to happen?
What sort of God are you?

Today is All Saints.
The day when we celebrate the great cloud of witnesses that surround us.
The day when we remember those who have inspired our own journey of faith.
Those who have gone before, and point the way for us.

So there is another response to death.
To Disney-fy it.
To make it all happy, cute, inspirational.
It's OK.
The saints remind us there is a happy-ever-after ending.

John's story of the raising of Lazarus asks us to stop flailing.
To stop allowing ourselves to be defined and constrained by the normal human responses to death.
To stop catastrophizing.
To stop idealising.
Actually, just to stop.
In the company of Jesus.
And to face the truth.

Jesus, hearing of the death of Lazarus, a man whom he deeply loved, is not afraid to own his feelings.
Biblical translations tend to play these down somewhat.
In today's passage, we are told that, met with the weeping family and friends, Jesus was '*greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.*'
But that's a bit weak.
The first verb, in Greek, is *embrimaomai*.
It means angry. Furious. Indignant.

The second verb is *tarasso*.
Agitated. Troubled.

What made him so angry?

So disturbed?

Commentators have asked this question for two millennia.

John Chrysostom suggested that Jesus was angry at the prospect of his own death, and his coming battle with the powers of darkness.

Rudolf Bultmann thought Jesus was angry because Mary and the Jews had no faith in him.

But it's important to read on.

To verse 35, famously the shortest verse in the whole Bible.

Jesus wept.

Or, more accurately but less powerfully, Jesus began to weep.

Here is God, in Jesus, allowing himself to feel the anger we all feel when faced with the shock, the horror, the unfairness of death.

Here is God, in Jesus, allowing himself to fully inhabit the grief of the human condition.

In Greek philosophical thought, God is defined by *apatheia*.

A being whose perfection leaves him untouched by the chances and changes of this mortal life.

Immortal, invisible God only wise.

Far above all the petty troubles that haunt our vulnerabilities.

This is not our God.

Our God is the opposite of *apathetic*.

Our God chose to inhabit this body, this flesh and blood, this life, this death.

To feel with us what it means to be mortal.

Contingent.

Deeply disturbed by our own helplessness.

But that is not the end of the story.

Jesus does not remain in his anger.

His disturbance.

His grief.

Where have you laid him? He asks.

And the crowd reply, *'come and see.'*

How many times have those words been spoken in the gospel stories?

Usually by Jesus inviting yet another person to come and experience the Kingdom of God for himself.

To become a disciple.

Come and see.

But this time, it is Jesus who is invited to come and see.
And to see not life in all its fullness, but death in all its smelly reality.

The stone is rolled away.
Jesus cries with a loud voice, *'Lazarus, come out.'*
And the dead man came out.

Did I not tell you, Jesus says to Martha, that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?

We get stuck in some pretty dark places.
Each one of us will know what deprives us of light and life.
Each one of us will know how powerless we feel at times.
Each one of us will know just how vulnerable we are, in this fragile body.

John's gospel story invites us not to deny the reality of this.
But to embrace it.
Yes, it makes us angry.
Frantic.
Disturbed.
Yes, we want to say some pretty furious things to God.
Yes it makes us weep.
But that's OK.
We are not on our own with all these unmanageable feelings.
Jesus is right there with us.

And he invites us to look death in the face.
To feel what we feel.
And to claim life, here and now.
Like Martha, we find it easier to believe in the resurrection on the last day.
Some future hope.
The Messiah, the Son of God, the one who will come.
Some time.

But Jesus says it's not just about our future hope.
It's not just about being reunited with the Saints in Light one day.
It's about living now as though death has no power over your days.
Because you belong, in life and in death, to God.
Amen.