

Eternity Sunday, November 24, 2013
Speak Comfortably to Jerusalem
Isaiah 53: 1 - 5; John 11: 17 - 27; 32 - 36
by Jeff Taylor

We come into one another's presence in this time and in this place knowing - or better still, trusting - that we are in the presence of the Holy One. Today we gather for a particular holy purpose: to remember and grieve those lost to us in the past year and years. We hope to honour them by offering remembrance and at least a semblance of the grief with which our Lord himself was well acquainted.

It is entirely in our nature to make holy - ie. to set aside time and space - for the act of mourning. By hallowing this occasion we legitimize the expression of pain, regret, anger, compassion, and other feelings that we do not easily acknowledge in normal time and space. And even in this place and company, indeed maybe especially so, some of us may feel less comfortable expressing weakness, pain, and doubt. And so to counter our reluctance we follow the example of our bible ancestors and ritualize our grief that it may be safely housed and experienced in trusted company. Thus we declare this day each year to be a time of remembrance, mourning, and compassion - Eternity Sunday.

We grieve for the lost opportunities for future delights, adventures, accomplishments, and enlightenments our dear ones might yet have enjoyed. Even of those whose span reached the usual limits of our kind we might still mourn their early-felt departure. For others we may be relieved that they were spared further anguish of body and mind, and weariness of the soul; though be very comfortable with that sense of relief.

Even less comfortable are we with our relief at the passing of those whose lives had become a burden to us. We would have wanted to have had the patience of our mothering God with those who had become unrelentingly broken and slipped away from us without clear resolution and holy trajectory. And even if we have found a goodly measure of grace for those who left us on poor terms, we cannot deny that we have experienced some unburdening, and that probably leaves us feeling ill at ease with ourselves.

Please know that God is gracious to them and us, full of mercy, and abounding in steadfast love. Know too that what we knew of them and what they knew of themselves when they were last with us was a blurry reflection of their truest selves. But now they see as clearly as if face to face. While with us, they and we knew only in part; but in the presence of the Holy One, they now know fully even as they have been fully known. (borrowing from 1 Cor. 13)

And so our grieving is as complex as are we and those we mourn. The Lord knows all these hues of grief and many more not named here. Jesus grieved for the departed, for those (including himself) feeling the pain of the loss of loved ones, and for his entire human family, all of whom must face the grief of the death of others, and become, in our deaths, the source of grief for others.

The Lord grieved and in doing so made it holy. Mourning our dead is a holy act because in it we do our small part in amen-ing God's declaration that our first mother

and father and all we their children were created to be "very good." We agree with God that each life ended is a loss to creation.

It is holy to grieve because, in it, we place ourselves in God's care, unable to do anything other. And not only in God's care, but in the care of one another, "thus fulfilling the law of Christ" as Paul put it in Galatians. In grief we acknowledge what God has always remembered about those who have died and we who remain - that our frames are but dust, subject, at times, to powerful forces of darkness and decay.

But the darkness does not get the final say: light when it comes (and it always comes) by its very nature overcomes darkness. And so, in time - holy time - the sting of grief dulls so that we may go on living; changed for sure, but still alive - gloriously, alive. Hear again the word of the Lord, spoken to his friend and partner in grief:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

He asked Martha, "do you believe this?" That's interesting and we'll come back to that. But notice in Martha's answer that she believes Jesus to be not only the messiah (many were beginning to suspect that) but that he is also "the son of God." John is recounting Martha's faith proclamation to Christians living near the end of the first century under the increasingly brutal oppression of Roman emperors who had taken to calling themselves sons of god. Some of those hearing John's gospel were mourning fellow believers put to death under the authority of one of these "sons of god." John wants his hearers to know that Caesar is not the son of God, but rather Jesus is, and Jesus has even higher authority; for the Roman "son of god" had authority to put to death death, but the true Son of God, Jesus, has authority to raise the dead.

Now, while there are many Christians in the world who risk their lives to follow Jesus, there are just a very few of us here who know that threat - so far. For most of our deadly enemies are more likely to be disease, accident, sometimes violence, sometimes our own despair, and for all of us: time. But over all of these is a greater authority: Jesus, the true son of the true God.

Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" Why did he ask? Would he not have raised Lazarus if Martha had doubted? Didn't/doesn't Jesus do miracles as signs to promote faith? Yes, often. But then he sometimes performs them because people already had faith. ("Go, your faith has made you well.") We seem to need both signs of reassurance and also the challenge to be convinced of things we haven't yet seen, and God knows we need both. Recall a man in Mark's gospel who brought his son to Jesus for healing. Jesus asked if he believed Jesus could do it and the man replied, "I believe Lord, help me overcome my unbelief." That was a good answer - good enough for Jesus who healed the boy immediately.

For that man, for Martha, and for us, speaking our faith gives us an opportunity to our exercise our sometimes meager confidence in God, to make it stronger. And it can open our eyes to see the power of God unleashed against death. Speaking our faith might even give God leave to act. "Whatever we loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven"? In our passage Jesus was empowered by God, and maybe by Martha, to raise her brother

Lazarus from the grave - for a time at least - as a sign of Jesus' resurrection to come and ours to follow.

Our mourning is an expression of our genuine pain and sense of powerlessness; but we do not mourn without hope. We have the hope of resurrection which gave Jesus the confidence to offer the assurance he gave us in the sermon on the mount:

VOICE: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Blessed? Yes, blessed - because you choose to honour with remembrance and mourning lives lived with your open heart, joining Christ in his passion.

VOICE: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Blessed? Yes, blessed; because your compassion sounds a mighty "amen" to God's very good creation. And so God names you blessed.

VOICE 1: "for they will be comforted."

Comforted by those who are close to us and would not have us bear heavy burdens alone. For who will be comforted: those with no burden, or those who mourn? Will not those who mourn be comforted?

VOICE: "they will be comforted."

Comforted by the Holy One, whose yoke is easy and burden is light.

VOICE: "comforted."

Comfort. Comfort my people, says our God. Speak comfort to the city of peace, and say that their struggle is over and their sins are forgiven.

VOICE 1: "comfort."

"Blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted."
Blessed be the word of the Lord.