

All Souls sermon by Andrew 3 Nov 2019

John 11: 17-36

Lord, if you had been here... And Jesus began to weep. Maybe the two most poignant words in the Bible, “Jesus wept.” No words, no explanations, no false hope or empty words of comfort. He just starts to cry and the people say: “See how he loved him.”

There’s a numbness about grief where words won’t come and words aren’t enough. I remember when my Dad died suddenly at home at the age of forty-four (I was sixteen), praying for the ambulance to get to him in time (which it didn’t), then going through the whole thing, utterly numb at first, then full of teen-aged anger. How could a loving God have done this to us?

Lord, if you had been here... Grief leaves us often with lots of questions, but no answers. C.S. Lewis (of the Narnia stories, “The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe” and a so many books) he was one of the foremost Christian writers of his generation, but when his wife, Joy, died, he was poleaxed. Faith almost evaporated overnight. He’d only found love very late in life, only for it to be snatched away when Joy died within just a few years. In fact, they were married in hospital as she lay dying.

Lewis was left feeling angry, betrayed even, and the experience resulted in a short book that’s possibly helped more people than any of his others. It’s called “A Grief observed.” He writes: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. *He goes on...*”

There are moments, most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so very much, after all... I was happy before I met her. People get over these things. Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory — and all this 'common sense' vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.

Meanwhile, where is God? Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”

Those words of Lewis’s speak to the experience of everyone who’s ever lost someone close to them, that sense of being rocked to your foundations, utterly bereft. But this is the moment that Jesus shares with his tears. This is the moment that Jesus shares when he’s on the Cross and the sky is black, and *with and for*, every single one of us he cries out “Why?” “My God, my God, why?”

So I wonder can we get our heads round the thought that in Jesus God takes loss and absence and silence and despair into himself – as the God who weeps - that somehow our sense of being abandoned and lost and lonely, all those things we feel are echoed in the heart of God? When Eric Clapton’s little boy, who was just four years old, died

falling out of a skyscraper window in New York, he wrote a song for him called “tears in heaven”. A little boy dies, God’s heart aches, there are tears in heaven.

In that WH Auden poem, “Stop all the clocks”, which featured in the film, “Four Weddings and a Funeral”, a grieving partner speaks for our sense of loss:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

This is the poetry of tears. “My God, why? See how he loved him.” This is us saying that the people we’ve loved and miss so much, we’ll always love them and we’ll always miss them. Sometimes you can feel like you’re expected to get over feeling like this, but we know it’s not like that, and that’s why we hold this service tonight. This is a sacred time and a sacred space for us to light a candle for the kind of love that truthfully never dies.

Because there is a rumour, started on that first Easter, that light still shines in the darkness and death hasn’t had the last word. That sense of “if only” and “why?” and “nothing now can ever come to any good” is offered a word of hope. And we might not be ready for that yet, but we can hear its echoes even while we’re grieving.

It’s for this that we light and relight our Easter candle every year, believing that in spite of every darkness this is the light that conquers all. We believe that everyone we’ve loved is bathed in that light and held in love. For us they’ll always shine. All they’ve been for us, all they still are - all our memories of them, happy and sad (all those things about them that made them so unendingly real to us) - all that’s going to live on in us because of them, and that’s what we light candles for tonight. Tonight, we honour them, we remember them and we speak their names with love like we always have.