

Defeating Defeat!

Lamentations 3^{17-26,31-33}; Psalm 23; Romans 5⁵⁻¹¹; John 5¹⁹⁻²⁵

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3²²⁻²³)

Fr Julian sends his apologies for this evening - we had been expecting him to preach for this service. He was unwell in the night and I have assured him of our love and prayers. Forgive my ramblings in place of what he had prepared.

This is a very special evening in the Church year - where we remind ourselves that we don't pray for our dead but we do pray with them: they are part of the Church Universal, more so for them when this human life is relinquished rather than the experience we currently have of being restricted by it.

In part the readings for this evening are full of the confident faith that the Church owns in the face of death:

- ✦ John records the words of Jesus: **Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life. 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.** We hold fast to the conviction that death is conquered by Jesus.
- ✦ Paul speaks about a **hope** that **does not disappoint us**. It is based on the life that God gives based on that simple yet profound truth: **while we were still sinners Christ died for us.**
- ✦ The Psalmist holds firm to a two-fold hope: **though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me** and the consumption of a life of faith, that **I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

Yet, the thing that unites so many of us as we come together tonight is our experience of someone we have shared our life with, someone we have loved, has died. We bury our dead in the hope of the resurrection and we know the Christian conviction that

death has been defeated: but sometimes our humanity is overwhelmed by what we have lost and the power of grief threatens to defeat us.

In the gentle grace of God the writer of the Lamentations comes alongside us so that we don't add guilt to grief when we cannot immediately dance at the prospect of death. This is someone who understands loss:

- ✦ **My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is** matched with **Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for**. The relentlessness of grief is expressed in **My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me**. Loss can be so exhausting.
- ✦ It is the gentleness of the dawning of the possibility of hope that is honest: **But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness**. For those for whom the night is a nightmare and the dawning of a new day is the extension of hopelessness, it takes time to be open to the possibility that this will ease - yet, God holds us in his faithfulness and continues to do so until we know we are, and always have been, held in his love. God cannot let us go.
- ✦ Those who know grief know that time doesn't heal, time simply passes and we simply get used to living with our loss - but even that is present in Lamentations: **the Lord is good to those who wait for him** and **Although he causes grief, he will have compassion**. Grief is a high price to pay for loving those who have shared our lives.

The faith of the Psalmist, of John and of Paul is like a raging fire - confident, consuming and even aggressive. It is true, of course, but it isn't always helpful when the reality of death has to be faced while the hope of resurrection is in the future.

At so many funerals I speak of the power of the Easter Candle - a single light that is hardly visible in daylight or when all the lights are on. Yet, in the darkness that simple flame becomes more potent. Faith is like that light and flicker as it may it will not go out.

When you come to communion please do light a candle on the way back as simple expression of our confidence that death is defeated and that grief will not defeat us.