

*All Saints Sunday 2024*

*John 11:32-44*

The Gospel reading we've just heard contains, famously, the shortest verse in the Bible. Just two words, but words packed full of meaning: Jesus wept.

The man who wrote those words, remember, believed that Jesus was none other than God made man. John begins his Gospel by saying that that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God – and that the Word became flesh dwelt among us, in Jesus. What did he mean by 'Word'? Hard to say in a few words, but something like this: what becomes flesh in Jesus is the true self-expression of God, that Jesus' life is nothing other than the pure speech of God. If you would know who God is, what God is like, look at Jesus.

And when you do, you see a weeping man. This God does not sit above in the heavens, indifferent, uncaring, unaffected by what happens to his creatures. If he is all powerful, all mighty, then whatever those words mean, it isn't straightforward. What happens here, what happens to us, hurts God. God weeps.

And what make him weep is death, the death of his friend Lazarus, and the grief of his sister Mary and those around her. Death, in the Bible, is tragedy. It was not for this that we were made – not for funerals and coffins and mourning. God made us, Scripture teaches, out of joy – he made us to sing and dance and shine and love. Death spits in the face of all that. It breaks us into dust, and it cuts us off from each other. All that God wants, fails. And so, Jesus weeps.

'Where have you laid him?' he says to the mourners. Where is my friend Lazarus? And they say, 'Lord, come and see.' Now, if you've been reading John's Gospel carefully, this is one of the most exquisite artistic touches there is. Right back in chapter one, Jesus summoned the first disciples to follow him with the words, 'Come and see'. God said to man, come and be with me, come and learn, let me show you how things are. Now, man is saying to God: come and see, come and be with us, among the tombs, with the dead. Let us show you how things are. Then, man learned from God. Now, God learns from man. We lead God towards the tombs, into the heart of all our failure. And that, in a way, is what the rest of John's Gospel, tracing Jesus' journey to the Cross, his journey into death, is all about.

A Gospel is meant to be Good News, and preaching is meant to be joyful. Where is the Gospel, the joy, in this preaching? It will come, but first comes another reality: the anger. John speaks of it twice in our reading, with the rather wooden translation in English of his being 'greatly disturbed in spirit.' The Greek, some scholars suggest, would be better translated as 'snorting with fury'. God does not just weep before death, he does not just walk with us in sorrow and compassion. He strides towards death as a righteous warrior, burning with rage against the enemy that would do this to us, that dares do this to God. Death is an outrage, which must not stand. Jesus strides into death to fight it, to destroy it from within. That's what is anticipated in the story of his bringing Lazarus from the tomb, and once again it is what the rest of John's Gospel is about, culminating in the story of Easter.

This is what we celebrate in every Eucharist. We celebrate the fact that we are loved so much that a compassionate, furious God becomes man for us. That as man, he goes into the very heart of our failure, into our death: into that which is most empty, most futile, most lonely; to the place where there is no hope and no love, the grave. That place crushes all our life. But he brings into it something greater, he brings into it, quite simply, God – the life that cannot be crushed, the life that is always, always bursting out of itself in joy and love, the eternal spring of everything. Death can no more crush Jesus Christ, God incarnate, than you or I could put out the Sun. He blazes with love in the deepest darkness, and that blaze, ultimately, destroys death. Death is destroyed, because God went into the darkness, looking for all that had been lost, broken and defeated and He touched it, every last bit of it, with his life. And when things are filled with that life, everything that was shines again, leaps and dances and loves. That's why, incidentally, singing is such a major part of our worship. Singing – sheer ecstatic beauty making singing – is just what lives touched by Jesus are.

At every Eucharist, what we hope and trust is that our lives are touched by Jesus. That is the meaning of what we do with the bread and the wine, trusting in the promise he made that when we do this, he will be here – that as we eat and drink them, we eat and drink Him. And at an All Saints Day Eucharist, what we remember especially is that that promise is so much greater than just being about *us*. It is for the people all around us – people across the continents and throughout the centuries. It is for those who lie around this church; those whose graves we know, and those forgotten by everyone. Not one will be left behind, not one will be left alone. He knits us all into one great communion, one great sharing of love. And for that, we give thanks and praise to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

