

LENT 5 – YEAR A (2026)

'Jesus wept' may be the shortest verse in the Bible, but those two words convey immeasurably more than that Jesus had a good old cry because his friend had died. Indeed, they speak beyond the immediate emotional drama of the scene to the depths of divine compassion within the human heart of the Son of God. And, whilst the raising of Lazarus is the last sign in John's Gospel, demonstrating Jesus' power as God over death, it is as much about Jesus' own humanity and destiny, as it is about the restoration of life to a man who lived and died twice. Because, by including the potentially insignificant detail that Jesus wept in his account of the resuscitation of Lazarus, John is making an important theological assertion: that the Word made flesh, through whom all things were created, not only shares our human nature so fully that he experiences grief as we do; but, also, that Jesus' tears fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah, in which the Suffering Servant was spoken of as 'a man of sorrows...acquainted with grief'. Jesus' grief, then, not only convinces us of his humanity, and solidarity with us; it also points to his own destiny, and the death that he will die for our salvation. But what was he crying about on that fraught day at Bethany? Who was he crying for? Whilst we can never know the definitive answers to these questions, we can take a reasonable guess based upon our own experience. As we so often are, Jesus was moved by the charged emotional atmosphere of the moment: Lazarus's sisters, and all who mourned him, were weeping in grief, and Jesus'

couldn't help but weep as well. How often have we been at a funeral, and said something like, 'Don't start crying, or you'll set me off too'? Grief, like laughter, is infectious. And so, without a doubt, we can say that Jesus was moved emotionally out of love for his friends, whose beloved brother had died; just as, of course, he would have wept for Lazarus himself, though he knew that he would soon raise him to life. But, I believe that Jesus' grief was more expansive: for, when we experience the immediate grief of others, it stirs deep within us those other griefs that we carry in our hearts – the death of loved ones, disappointments and failures – which often come to the surface when we share another's sorrow. So, perhaps Jesus was also weeping for other losses: his earthly father, S. Joseph, for example, who would have died long before. And I think that we can say with confidence that Jesus also wept for himself, and the death that he was soon to die; because, not long after the raising of Lazarus, Jesus would embody Isaiah's prophecy, and share in the common fate of all humanity, death itself, so that the world might be saved. It is not enough that the Son of God should share in our sufferings and grief; he must also share in our death, so that suffering, grief and death might be redeemed. And, just as the raising of Lazarus pointed towards Jesus' forthcoming Resurrection; so also Jesus' tears signify his compassion for us as we face our own deaths, and those of our loved ones; and of his continuing grief for the world that he loves, but is lost in sin and shrouded in the shadow of death.

And, as we enter Passiontide, and more finely tune our thoughts to the contemplation of Jesus' suffering and death, today's Gospel reading encourages us to think about our own griefs in the light of Jesus' tears; and to ponder the difference that his promise of resurrection makes to our lives. Because, for many people today, grief – particularly public grief – is seen as something to be avoided or of which to be ashamed; or, if it is embraced, then it is often done so in a mawkish and emotionally effusive way. But, in reality, neither approach does us any good: for, the avoidance of grief simply buries what we need to express, and potentially leaves us open to deep psychological trauma further down the line; just as an overly-sentimental approach to death fails to take seriously the immensity of what has happened, as comfort is sought in platitudes and superstition, rather than in the consolations of true Faith. And this is what S. Paul meant when he told the Thessalonians, 'Do not grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope': here, he acknowledges that grief is intrinsic to the human condition and experience, as Jesus shows us; but he distinguishes between hopeful grief, and hopeless grief. And, though hopeful grief is still grief, and can be very bitter, it is transformed by the promise of resurrection, and of the new and everlasting life of the world to come. It is this grief that Christians are called to exhibit in the face of death; and it is this hope that we are called to share with a world that doesn't know how to deal with death, let alone what to believe about our ultimate destiny, and the means by which we might reach it.

And so, if Jesus' grief and Resurrection give us the confidence to express our grief in death, and hope in the resurrection to come, what of his tears? Crying comes more naturally to some than to others: emotionally charged films or plays, books or music have the power to elicit tears from even the hardest of hearts. Likewise, the innocent suffering of others, or frustration at our own limitations may cause us to weep. But, so often our tears are self-indulgent, caused by anger or self-pity; so often we cry for the wrong thing. In the old Missal, there is a 'Mass for Tears', which asks God that his grace might bring forth from our stony hearts tears of repentance. And, as we approach Holy Week, we would do well to imitate Jesus' tears as we express our sorrow for the sufferings that he bore out of love for us, and for our sins that led him to Calvary. And that is not to say that we should be overly scrupulous, nor that we should despair of God's mercy; rather, it is a reminder that there are some sins that should move us to tears, whilst recognising their remedy in the Cross of Christ, and the power of his never-failing grace to forgive us, and endlessly to offer us new beginnings.

As Jesus has shown us, there is nothing wrong with expressing our many natural emotions through crying, and it would do some of us good to cry more often: because, as those who believe Jesus to be the Resurrection and the Life, we know that the God who weeps takes our sorrows seriously, enters into, and redeems, them. For, our tears are not shed in vain if they are suffused with faith, hope and love; and one day God himself will wipe them from our eyes. Amen.