

## 5 Lent (A)

March 29, 2020

*They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So, the Jews said, 'See, how he loved him.'*  
— John 11:1-45

"Jesus began to weep." . . . But for whom, and for what? For Lazarus? That's what the religious leaders and the crowd think. And, yes, the family of Bethany clearly was special to him. Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary all but served (especially in John's Gospel) as a second family. So Jesus could not have helped being troubled in spirit, could not have helped being overcome with emotion.

But WHY does he weep? Perhaps that's the better question. Why is he overcome when he knows he is about to revive him; when he knows that Lazarus will live again in this world, knows he will be restored in the next minute to his sisters and his friends? Clearly his tears could not have been those for an irrecoverable loss.

Why does Jesus weep? Was it indeed out of love for his dear friend (as the crowd claims), a love somehow removed from the knowledge of what he was about to do? Even though Jesus could foresee, with his characteristic absolute trust in the Father, that soon the sorrow would be turned to joy, did he weep simply from love, for the sake of love—love for Lazarus, love for his sisters, love for those gathered there to mourn and remember, love even for those who were quick to question and accuse?

And if Jesus' love could extend this far, could it extend even further? Did it go even deeper? Was it then a universal love? Did his weeping in fact cover the whole earth? Was it a grief shared with and showered upon every bereft and lonely gathering, at every graveside and death bed? Did Jesus feel, in that moment, what Wordsworth called the "burden of the mystery? Did he hear, at his friend's grave, all the "still sad music of humanity?"

I know I'm mixing theology with poetry, the human with the divine—again! And I know that my focus here is but one part of an iconic passage that reinforces nearly all the central claims of our faith, culminating with Jesus' reminder to Martha, and to us, what she, and we, already hold to be true: "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." It doesn't get more powerful or more direct than this!

And yet for all the "high Christology"—as my seminary professors like to call it—there is, for me at least, that one moment, at Lazarus' grave, when Jesus' emotions get the better of him; that one tender, transporting moment when he would seem emotionally to gather all of human travail and anguish and sorrow to himself, and to make these realities his own—to claim them in his heart, and then to wash them with his tears.

It's as though he is saying to us, by this act—'Yes, you are destined for eternal life, as is the one I'm about to revive; for yes, the grave is not the goal; and yes, I have come into the world to conquer death altogether. But, also, yes, your earthly pain is real and vast and ancient, and because I am human like you, I know it and feel it all as deeply as well.' I've always found this implied truth contained in Jesus' tears to be the most endearing and heartening feature of this great gospel.

It's always seemed to me akin to an episode in the life of Martin Luther King, as depicted in the film *Selma*, where he seeks to console the grandfather of one of the little girls murdered in the church

bombing in Birmingham in 1963. It's every pastor's nightmarish challenge—what to say to someone whose whole world seems to have ended, and who is questioning how a God of love and mercy could have stood by and allowed it to happen.

In the film, Dr. King slowly approaches the man, who is looking vacantly out a window, his back to us, frozen in grief. The man turns around, as King puts one hand on his shoulder and looks steadily but gently into his eyes. After what seems an eternity of seconds, Dr. King says to him: "I don't know all of how or why this has happened. What I can tell you is, God was the first to mourn."

"God was the first to mourn." No fantasy about heaven needing another angel! No pious bromide about meeting our loved ones again "in the sweet by and by." Nothing about "she's in a better place." But rather, God was the first to mourn." God who is love, and who sent God's embodied love to us in the person of Christ, God who shares all our tragic journeys even before they've begun God was the first to mourn. God IS the first to mourn.

And the mourning continues; the weeping goes on. ... I had a parishioner years ago who was upset that the then newest Bible version had changed the wording in this Gospel from "Jesus wept" to "Jesus began to weep." He insisted that the former translation was more succinct, more evocative; and he seemed somewhat dismayed that I didn't readily share this opinion. For me, at least, the current version makes an important distinction: If we say that Jesus "began to weep," perhaps we are saying that he has never stopped weeping. We are saying that heaven and earth still meet in the heart of Christ, and that what we know he knows better than we know it ourselves. So, his tears finally are telling us that we are not alone to struggle alone, to grieve alone, to weep alone.

To be sure, the promise of the Resurrection is our foundational truth, the source and reason for all our Christian hope and striving. But so is Christ's promise to be with us always, "even to the end of the age." So is his love—given to all, a love strengthened by service, watered by earthly tears, ending with eternal joy.

Was there ever a season when faith in this two-fold promise was more desperately needed than it is now, when around the world and across our country people also stand at the edge of a grave—many literally and most emotionally—you and among them? For we too are wondering, doubting, fearing; we too are expecting, through our confusion and maybe resentment—not unlike that of Martha and Mary—the Lord to do more, to be more, to solve all of this for us, and to come at the moment when we call him? Still, at the same time, we hold out, with them, the confidence we've also learned to expect in Jesus' power and reach. "But even now," Martha admits, "I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Was there ever a time, then, for faith to remind us (as it does finally for Mary and Martha) that the Lord has done and is doing more than we can ever ask or imagine—beginning with those very burdens we feel are beyond our strength, and ending with that very love beyond our telling? A love we can search in his heart, a love we can see in his eyes, a love we remember. Love that IS resurrection and life. And so, a love that, through tears and joys and sorrows, still makes us strong, still leads us on. Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon