

Sunday, November 09, 2025
Remembrance Sunday

Solemn Requiem Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on
Wisdom 3:1-9; Luke 7:11-16

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Wiping Away All Tears

I want to begin this homily with one of my favorite poems about death by the celebrated British poet and dramatist, Tony Harrison, who died just a few weeks ago at the age of 88. He grew up in a Northern English working-class town and published this poem in 1981, the year I graduated from University. The poem reflects on the way his father dealt with the death of his wife and how, in turn, he subsequently dealt with his own father's death. It is titled, *Long Distance II*:^[1]

*Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
put hot water bottles her side of the bed
and still went to renew her transport pass.*

*You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
to clear away her things and look alone
as though his still raw love were such a crime.*

*He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.*

*I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,
in my new black leather phone book there's your name
and the disconnected number I still call.*

We live in an age when so many funeral customs have all but disappeared. Gone are the days of washing and preparing the body, bringing the body home before the funeral, sharing stories, and even feasting around the body; many funerals, these days, do not even have the body present. As we heard in our first

lesson, so many find death a discomfort even to talk about; *“In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster.”*

But what does the writer go on to say?

“...they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.”

Their hope is full of immortality.

It is hard, though, to live that sense of hopefulness when your whole world is racked with grief and, in spite of the development of palliative care and the hospice movement, so many of us still avoid talking about death. The other year, the bishops in the Church of England had a campaign to bring death and bereavement into the curriculum of church schools and it was met in the press with incredulity as if, somehow, exposing children to the concept of death would damage them. I have to say that my sense of incredulity was not about the idea of discussing such topics with children, but the idea of trying to protect them from the very thing that they were certain to experience in their lives!

I will never forget when I was at Exeter Cathedral, and one of our nine-year old choristers, Noah, left the Cathedral Choir School after an afternoon of sport. He had been fighting a nasty cold, but it did not stop him and some other choristers on their walk home singing very loudly some lines from Benjamin Britten’s wonderful *Hymn to St. Cecilia* that they had been learning – words of the great poet W.H. Auden:

[2]

*Blonde Aphrodite rose up excited,
Moved to delight by the melody,
White as an orchid she rode quite naked
In an oyster shell on top of the sea.*

Those boys thought it was wonderfully naughty to sing about Aphrodite riding ‘quite naked’ in Church, and they repeated it all the way home!

The next day, Noah was dead. He didn’t just have a cold. It was the cold that killed him, but because he had acute leukemia. There was nothing that the hospital could do and we could find no words to comfort his mother. In our grief and disbelief, it was actually the children of the Cathedral School who ministered most profoundly to those of us who could not cope. *They* helped us in our remembrance of young Noah, by planning his funeral with the chaplain. Noah’s small white coffin was placed near the choir stalls where he sang only a few days before, as his friends from the Cathedral School and his former primary school formed a procession that brought symbols of his life to place around the coffin. Noah loved soccer, and I will never forget the sight of two choristers, wearing school football kit, dribbling and kicking their soccer balls up the aisle. Meanwhile his 3 year-old sister decided to dance. They entered into our grief in a most profound and powerful way.

And this takes us to the Gospel story that we have just heard of the woman of Nain burying her child. She is accompanied by a large crowd because she has lost everything. Luke describes the funeral procession in a way that would not be lost on his hearers 2000 years ago: **“He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow.”** As a woman, as a widow, and now with no child, she was the lowest of the low in society and, most likely, penniless – needing charity to help her to live. However, I guess the meagre existence of her future state of life was not at the forefront of her mind for her only child is dead. Jesus is, therefore, so

tender when he sees her, **“Do not weep,”** he says. This is not a man trying to ‘fix things;’ neither is it a denial of her grief. “Do not weep.” The part of the story that I want us to concentrate on is not the fact that he raises the boy from the dead and gives him back to his mother. That’s great, but it’s not great for Noah’s mum; it’s not great for those of us who have lost children; it’s not good for us to hear that story, but what is good for us is to hear the reason why he said those words ‘do not weep.’ Luke tells us that, when he saw the woman, **he had compassion for her.** Jesus had compassion for her.

Compassion is a powerful word in the bible. For some people, the word compassion may be seen as a weak emotion – a ‘giving in’ to feelings. We seem to live in an age of angry emotions and getting one’s own back. Some people confuse the word compassion with the word empathy. Both words are about feelings but while empathy is about *understanding* someone’s feelings, compassion is more a state of *entering into* those feelings in a proactive way.

The word compassion in Latin or English means, literally, ‘to suffer with’ but it is much deeper than that when we go to the origins of the word as used in the bible in Greek and in Hebrew. In the Gospels, the Greek word is used only 12 times to refer to Jesus or the Father, and has at its root the word for *the gut* or *intestines*. It means that, when Jesus saw the widow in her grief, his stomach churned, or it felt like his intestines were turned inside out – *he felt it in his gut*. In Hebrew, though, the word for compassion, has an even stronger root – for it derives from the word for the *womb*. So, when the Bible talks about compassion, and a compassionate God, we are saying that God feels the state of the universe and its suffering *within himself*; quite literally, ‘in his gut or in his womb.’

Henri Nouwen, talking about Compassion, says this:

Compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden... When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself. ^[3]

Just listen to that! **When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.**

This is the God that we worship today; the compassionate God whose love and tenderness is poured out for you and for me. No wonder that Saint John the Divine describes in his vision of heaven how God will welcome the dead: “*The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” (Revelation 7:17)

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Jesus said to the widow, “Do not weep.”

The abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.

My dear friends, on the cross, Jesus experienced death for you and for me. From the cross, Jesus embraced all of humanity and the consequence of our mortality. When the soldier pierced his side with a lance, his

sacred heart was broken, and the ground of all love burst open revealing the compassionate nature of our God.

This poem is by the former US poet laureate, Mark Strand, and is titled 'The End.' ^[4]

*Not every man knows what he shall sing at the end,
Watching the pier as the ship sails away, or what it will seem like
When he's held by the sea's roar, motionless, there at the end,
Or what he shall hope for once it is clear that he'll never go back.*

*When the time has passed to prune the rose or caress the cat,
When the sunset torching the lawn and the full moon icing it down
No longer appear, not every man knows what he'll discover instead.
When the weight of the past leans against nothing, and the sky*

*Is no more than remembered light, and the stories of cirrus
And cumulus come to a close, and all the birds are suspended in flight,
Not every man knows what is waiting for him, or what he shall sing
When the ship he is on slips into darkness, there at the end.*

References

- 1 From 'Selected Poems' 1984
 - 2 From 'Anthem to St. Cecilia (for Benjamin Britten)' 1940
 - 3 From 'Compassion' pub. DLT 1982
 - 4 From 'The Continuous Life' 1990
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