

Sermon

06/09//20

Jeremiah 31:10-17

Matthew 5:1-4

[May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.]

“Blessed are those who mourn,” says Jesus.

I remember being at a gathering once. I don't recall exactly what kind it was: a church meeting, perhaps? A folk concert? Don't know. I was I think a fairly young man, and the others there were all some decades older. And I remember looking around the room as a thought struck me: *all of these people here have survived their parents*. They have seen their parents die, and yet they have somehow survived. *I was surrounded by orphans!*

This was a big deal for me.

As a child I spent a lot of time in near constant fear that my parents might suddenly die, and leave me. The middle years of my childhood corresponded with a particularly hard-hitting series of road safety advertisements on TV (I learned to leave the room quickly whenever an ad came on showing a happy family travelling in their car...) And as a result, for some years, whenever my parents would go out of an evening, I was convinced they would not return; I had a series of rituals and prayers to tilt the balance in their favour – clearly they worked... When we did a unit on fire safety at school, I became terrified that members of my family might die in a house-fire. And, sometimes, for no apparent reason, I would have dreams about their deaths. It's fair to say I was a nervous child. It's also just

possible that this anxiety *may* have had something to do with the life-threatening breast cancer my mother suffered from more than once, though I don't remember being particularly worried about *that* at the time. Children are odd. But, for whatever reason, I was convinced that at any moment my parents might die; and this loss would be unsurvivable.

Forty-odd years on, I come before you as *half* an orphan. Apart from his sciatica, my dad is still going reasonably strong at eighty-eight years; but, after some years mental and physical decline, my mother died five and a half years ago. It was sad; but survivable – here I am.

Much more tragically, my youngest sister died of cancer at the age of thirty-six, leaving behind her parents, her husband, and three children. As she lay dying I remember thinking that I could not imagine being alive, when she was not. But, as I discovered, Christina dead was more endurable than Christina dying, and somehow I *have* managed to live on without her.

At the great age of forty-nine I have seen family die, friends die, friendships die, and hopes die. And so far as I can tell grief and sorrow is woven deeply into the fabric of our lives – or, at least of those parts of it that most make life worth the living.

“If you love,” said the very wise Pentecostal paster who married Raewyn and me – “you should know that to love, is to enter into into a covenant with grief.” To love is to enter into into a covenant with grief.

We can, I suppose, skate across the surface of life, never being touched deeply, never touching deeply, never loving deeply, never longing deeply, never grieving deeply; but are those who achieve this the wisest or the most foolish?

I've been reading Frederick Buechner recently; in particular his latest book, which is called *A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory*. He knew a thing or two about grief and sorrow, did Buechner, after his alcoholic father killed himself when he was a child.

And in this book he describes how he told this story to a group in

Texas once, and afterwards the retreat leader came up to him and said, “you’ve had a good deal of pain in your life,” which, of course, he could’ve said to any one of them. And then he said, “You’ve been a good steward of it. You’ve been a good steward of your pain.” Which was an utterly strange idea.

What on earth might it mean to be “a good steward of our pain”? We normally talk of exercising stewardship of our gifts and resources, our wealth; can we really talk of stewardship of our lack, our need, our weakness, our disappointment, our grieving?

But we can all think perhaps of people who have been hollowed out and smoothed by their suffering as the wind and the rain weather an old tree, creating a new kind of beauty, a safe place to sit and be. And we know others whose suffering has grown only brambles and thorns of harshness and bitterness.

How might we respond to our own pain?

We can seek to deny it. Pretend it doesn’t exist. Minimise it. Lose ourselves in fantasies. Never address it, or think of it, or express it. Or only be able to express it by converting it into anger

We can try and dull it: with alcohol or other drugs, with Netflix, or with sex, or work, or even religion.

We can seize upon it, hold our suffering ever tighter, and make it the sole source of meaning for our life, shutting out the light, and competing with others as to who has suffered the most monstrous and crippling injuries.

Or we can live with our pain, make space for the really hard emotions as they come, let them go and return as they need to, as our experiences remake us and bear fruit.

What kind of fruit can suffering bear in our lives? There are many ways this can happen. We all know of the person who was bullied as a child and resolved that they should work to prevent this happening to anyone

around them ever again. The teacher or parent who longs to provide the kind of encouragement and support that they themselves never received. The person who has known loneliness, and therefore knows what a difference a single light of welcome can make for another. And beyond these specific responses to the injuries we may have received, there is the way that people who are acquainted with grief know that the world is often a harsh place, that the human spirit is fragile and easily bruised, and we are all of us vulnerable.

But “Blessed are you who mourn; *for you will be comforted.*” Suffering and grief will not have the final say. God is present with us even at our darkest moments, the most humiliating, most self-inflicted, most hopeless of situations. Many can speak of a peace that sometime emerges which has nothing to do with the circumstances that surrounded them.

“Everything will be okay in the end,” John Lennon is supposed to have said: “If it’s not okay, it’s not the end.” Or, as Julian of Norwich would have put it: “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

There’s a song by Colin Gibson:

Nothing is lost on the breath of God,
nothing is lost for ever;
God’s breath is love, and that love will remain,
holding the world for ever.
No impulse of love, no office of care,
no moment of life in its fulness;
no beginning too late, no ending too soon,
but is gathered and known in God’s goodness.

Nothing is lost. All is found.