

Jesus Wept

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A (RCL). John 1L:I-45. April 2, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

We heard this morning another long story from the Gospel according to John, but at the heart of it is one of the shortest verses in the Bible, John 11:35. In the original Greek

Edakrysen ho Iesofis.

"Jesus wept." Or, more precisely, "Jesus began to weep."

The tears of God. Not metaphorical, for a change. Real tears. A moment of emotional solidarity between the Creator and his creatures.

This has a special significance because the beneficiaries of Jesus' miracles tend also to be victims, from a certain point of view: The disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, tossed about in a storm, terrified-till Jesus calms the wind and water... Jesus' disciples and all those other people, all of them hungry, tired, and worried on a hillside-till Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes... The relatives and friends of Lazarus, torn by grief-till Jesus raises him to life. All of these people undergo intense stress for the purpose of our instruction.

This is because Jesus' miracles-in fact, I would say miracles in the Bible in general-are intended to teach the faithful throughout the ages. Their effect on those actually present at the miraculous event tends to be somewhat ambiguous. The man born blind, whose story we recently heard, certainly paid a high social price for his physical healing. But the story as it has come down to us tells us of the folly of human pride in the presence of the grace of God and of the absolute importance of forming a relationship with God that is illuminated by the light of Christ.

Similarly, the story of the raising of Lazarus dismays us with a picture of Jesus putting some of his very best friends through torment for the sake of making a theological point. Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany kept a household where Jesus was always welcome and much beloved, and in

which he and his entourage were clearly accustomed to stay from time to time.

But when Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, though Jesus appears to be near enough to Bethany to hurry there and intervene with a healing miracle, he dawdles and doesn't arrive in Bethany till his friend has been dead for four days.

This was clearly a moment in Jesus' ministry when he wanted to make the point that he himself was not only the light of the world but the life of the world-and to make that point in a way that would be utterly unforgettable.

To do this he had to wait longer than three days after his friend's death to bring him back to life. The Jews believed that the spirit of the deceased remained in the vicinity of the body for three days, but after that time departed for the afterlife; not till then was the person all the way dead. At that point, on the fourth day, the corruption of the body was considered irreversible; hence Martha's confidence that the decay of her brother's body had begun.

But this time Jesus had put people he particularly cared about, and who had shown much affection and hospitality toward him, through a really rough emotional meat grinder. So, not being hard-hearted (merely sure of his mission), Jesus responded to the grief of his friends with his own grief, as a sane and compassionate human being ought to do. For he was not only God, but also just a guy. One of us.

Jesus wept.

Then he set about showing what God wants to do for his friends: give them new life, give them victory over the grave, wipe every tear from their eyes.

What Jesus did for Mary, Martha and Lazarus, he is poised to do-indeed, he is already doing-for us. God may ask a lot of us sometimes. But he is not a cold-hearted experimenter, nor is he a hard-hearted taskmaster. He is our friend. Our brother. The one who shed tears for his friends. The grief in his heart, like the nails in his wrists, felt to him as such things do to any of us. What God asks of us is not what a manipulative or detached observer would ask, but what a participant would ask. He goes with us into the meat grinder. Every time. This does not diminish God's glory; it transforms

suffering.

The most wonderful thing about Jesus is that he wept, because that tells us that God is shoulder to shoulder with us whatever we have to go through.

With Jesus at our side, the way of the cross leads through tears to glory.

* A revision of the sermon preached at the Shared Ministry on April 10, 2011.