

5th June 2016 St Peter's Upper Riccarton

1 Kings 17: 17-24; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

"The Loving Heart"

How can we reconcile joy and sorrow, life and death?

Sometimes, when we see all the brokenness, all the tragedy around us we look for someone to blame. And that someone is often God. It's easy to blame God for the adversities that come our way.

In their grief and anger, people sometimes see illness, accidents, and death as being somehow caused by a capricious God playing games with his human creation. Others turn away from religion asking "What kind of God could let this happen?"

But it's **not** true that God wills and decides all the individual experiences that make up our lives. God **doesn't** take the life of a child. God **doesn't** create a tragedy that takes the life of a young parent leaving a family in anguish. Or in my case, God didn't cause me to get bladder cancer just to test my faith.

But it is certainly true that God can work in all circumstances to bring goodness out of evil and tragedy.

Our gospel today was about a widow who lost her only son. Author, Donald Miller gives us some insight into why this is such a tragedy.

He writes: "In this story death is seen at its worst. It had struck a youth, claiming its prey long before the lad had lived out a normal span of years. Death could conceivably be a mercy in old age. But here death had struck a particularly vicious blow taking the only son of a widow, leaving her defenceless in a cruel world... With no heir, the family name would be cut off in Israel. Here is the tragedy of humanity at its worst.

Then, in the midst of the tragedy, Jesus came. He was travelling in Galilee with his disciples and arrived at Nain, near Nazareth, just as the funeral procession was heading out to the burial caves. A crowd had turned out, probably with professional mourners leading the way, wailing and playing their flutes and cymbals.

Jesus would have realised that this was a widow who'd lost her only son, because there were no other men around her, supporting her. Luke tells us; "*When the Lord saw her, his heart was moved and he had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep'.*"

He touched the stretcher and said, "*Young man, I say to you arise.*" And the dead man sat up and began speaking.

But I think the miracle of life is not the main point of this story. The point is that God, through Jesus, came to someone in their deepest moment of hopelessness, and that person was given renewed hope. She realised that God cared, even for her.....she was no longer alone and forgotten.

Notice, that the woman didn't ask Jesus for help or even show faith.

Jesus was moved to action purely out of his compassion for her.

He still acts for us today. Jesus reaches into our lives just as he did to that widow at Nain, because his heart still aches; his heart still feels the pain, and the heartache. Because Jesus suffered, because he experienced what we have experienced, his heart can reach out to us as one who knows and as one who has been there.

The story is told about the painter, Turner. It goes like this:

“A crew of sailors were fighting for their lives one night, trying to keep their small steamer from capsizing during a snowstorm in the English Channel, when a scruffy old passenger suddenly demanded to be lashed to the mast. He said he wanted to experience the sea’s full fury so he could paint it. To get him out of their way, they tied him to the crow’s nest and he stayed up there for four hours, tossed by the gale winds and drenched by snow and freezing salt water.

And when he got down, he painted the sea as no one ever had before”.

Life need not be a lonely journey that we struggle, sometimes desperately, to make by ourselves. It seems that we are most open to feeling the power of God’s intervention in our lives when we feel the most hopeless and alone. Just when we feel our spiritual batteries to be dead and incapable of being recharged, Jesus comes to us, giving us His grace and peace. His presence is all that we need.

Joseph Bayly in ‘*The View From A Hearse*’ says that one of the best contributions we can make to a person going through intense suffering and loss is our presence without words. He writes: “Don’t try to “prove” anything to a survivor. An arm about the shoulder, a firm grip of the hand, a kiss: these are the proofs grief needs, not logical reasoning.”

Minister, Tim Zingale lost his young son after a long battle with leukaemia. He wrote: *I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I knew were true.*

I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did.

Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.

He just sat beside me for an hour or more. That is what we need when we are in the grip of despair and grief. No words, no lecture, no explanation, just a presence, the presence of Christ through another...

The presence of Christ through the Spirit working with our Spirit, to bring us a measure of his grace.”

Today’s readings all speak of transformation and renewal.

Elijah demonstrates the power of the living God by restoring a child to life.

Paul tells the Galatians how his life was turned around when he met the living Christ on the road to Damascus, leading him to dedicate his life to proclaiming the transforming, renewing power of the Gospel. Jesus restores the son of the widow of Nain and gives him back to his mother.

Grief is transformed into joy, and death to life.

God is present with his people in every age.

Lives continue to be transformed every day.

Grief is still transformed into joy, death into life, by the power of the Holy Spirit . **Amen**

Ackns: John Maynard; Pastor Tim Zingale; Joseph Bayly ‘The View From A Hearse’ Donald Miller.