



Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 22 August 2021

READINGS

1 Kings 8: 1,6,10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6: 10-20; John 6: 56-69

God works in God's own way

Welcome to our online congregation as we continue in this Month of Compassion and we remind ourselves of the many who suffer seriously in many ways. Today we think particularly of those who have been bereaved, and this is something that ultimately affects us all in one way or another.

I remember the first time I encountered a death which directly affected me. My grandparents lived far away and I never really knew any of them, so their loss did not affect me. But I was there when my father died very unexpectedly. At breakfast we were planning where to go for tea, and by lunchtime we were thinking about a funeral. In the midst of the shock and upset that such an event brings, the thing that struck me most forcibly was the absolute finality of it. He was gone. His presence which had been part of our lives into adulthood had disappeared as if it had never been there. This is the crux of bereavement. The absence is almost tangible, there is no going back, and for all our education and the “if you want it you can have it” philosophy, death reminds us that in the end, we have very little control over our lives and absolutely none over our ultimate destiny. In the end, dust we are and unto dust we all return, and we will vanish from the earth and be gone just as finally. Nowhere has this become more evident than in the all-pervasive Covid 19 and the unpredictability of some of the deaths.

Everything ends. Birth, living and dying is part of everything. When people who have lived out their lives fully, are given back to God by those who love them and who will remember them and will always appreciate them, all are sad, but there is a sense of a fitting end, and in a way, there's a rightness to it. We mourn with those who grieve, but we accept that that is the way things are, and we carry on until it's our turn. – hopefully when we have achieved and fulfilled all we have been born to do.

The Rev Jacqui Lewis in sermon preached in 2017 puts it as follows:

I think grief puts us in touch with our vulnerabilities. I think the feeling of grief lets us know the power of wounds to shape our stories. I think it lets us know how capable we are of having our hearts broken and our feelings hurt. I think it lets us know the link that we each have because we're human. Because we're human, we hurt. Because we're human, we have tears to cry. Because we're human, our hearts are broken. Because we're human, we understand that loss is a universal language. Everybody grieves. All of humanity grieves. All of us have setbacks, broken dreams. All of us have broken

relationships or unrealized possibilities. All of us have bodies that just don't do what they used to do. Though grief is personal, every person grieves.

So this letting go is an inevitable part of life, as is grief for the loss of loved ones and for the way things were.

But this month of compassion we mourn particularly so many unnecessary deaths which is where tragedy strikes. This month of compassion tells us that there are no shortages of people to pray for. Parents whose untimely death, from HIV/AIDS, from TB, from car accidents and violence have left many households in the hands of older siblings who are still children themselves. The whole issue of gender-based violence has meant the death of many women, some of them caregivers, and is a blot of the psyche of our country. Unemployment means there is no money for good food and medical care, and deaths occur where they shouldn't as a result. When we grieve for those people, we grieve not only for the loss of an unreplaceable person, but for the loss of neighbourliness, trust, community care and justice. It is so much bigger than us and we despair of ever finding solutions to this uncalled for suffering. We would agree with the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who, speaking of a society with no government said, in 1651

"No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

We long for a powerful God who can come and fix it. We try and please God by being good, by reading the Bible and praying more in the hopes that such behaviour will save us from loss and devastation and getting old and staying poor and the horrors of an out-of-control society. And when things spiral into unexpected places, we doubt. And as we comfort those who mourn, we wonder if the whole God thing just a ruse to keep us subjected, and is life ultimately meaningless? Or does God not care?

God does care, but in God's way, not ours. We have some control, but not complete control. Science can tell us that eating well, sleeping enough, getting exercise and living in a loving and supportive community will give you a longer life, but there is no guarantee you WILL make 105 years old or that you will be free of health issues. We can to some extent control our society by calling our governments into account and demanding good schooling, well-built roads and safely constructed buildings, and a health system that works efficiently for the good of all, but we cannot control people who drink and drive, or old trees which fall down in a thunderstorm and cause damage. Science can tell us that getting the Covid vaccine will mean that instead of a 16% chance of serious illness and death from the virus we will safely reduce the risk to 1% or less. But that doesn't mean we won't get sick, or that we won't be affected by those who refuse the vaccine or to wear their masks. There are so many variables, that we can be careful, and watchful, but never in full control.

It is also true that nothing is forever. The Temple of Solomon, which, in today's reading was opened and the Ark of the Covenant brought into it with such joy and celebration – it is no more. The remaining Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is not even Solomon's temple. That was destroyed at the time of the Babylonian exile, and was rebuilt in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. But that temple was defiled in the time of the Greeks, and was later made magnificent again by Herod. But even that one was destroyed by the Romans, leaving the one wall we know of today. Eternity on earth? It's not going to happen – not like this anyway.

But what St Paul tells us is that we fight for a good life, a spiritual life for all, not a long life. It's geared towards making us good people so that others can become good, well-rounded fulfilled people, and the world becomes a good place to be in. Look at the armour – belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness. What government, business, school, etc doesn't need that? The Gospel of peace – Social media could use a dollop of that. Shield of faith - everything that comes at us, we filter it through our faith in our Lord and Saviour and can see the aforesaid truth, righteousness and peace. Helmet of Salvation. We willingly decide to be saved by God and take on an allegiance to Christ. So with our head we continue to think our way through everything, and the sword of the spirit, that is, our Bible informs us of where God stands. And above all, persistence in prayer. All of this is about what we are doing NOW. And what we do NOW impacts the future whether or not we are there to see it. So we look after our health, and exercise and take out insurance and put money into a pension fund so that we work for those for whom we have compassion for as long as possible. They then come out of their poverty and abuse and ignorance and take on their own armour of God to create a beautiful world NOW. We have NOW. We may or may not have the future.

This is hard, and we have been looking all month at John chapter 6. Jesus as the Bread of Life promises eternal life – great. But you have to eat his flesh and drink his blood and take on the burden of Salvation with him. That's hard, and many prefer the nebulous cloud of happy thoughts, addictive practices and security bought by money, acquired honestly or otherwise. It is as the disciples who did NOT abandon the hard teaching said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" We don't have any choice if we want eternal life. But quite how it will work out, we don't know either. There is always a fundamental mystery around what God does. We have lost Solomon's temple, but we do have Solomon's wisdom. Isn't that a form of eternal life? And we are here, worshipping because of the faithfulness of those who have gone, are forgotten and in fact are not even known anymore. It's as if they never existed, but yet their contribution has given us eternal life and a church where it can be passed on to others. Is this not another form of eternity? And our values and our sense of right and wrong and our love of God which we learned from our parents who learnt it from unknown ancestors, and we pass on to our children, surely this is another form of eternal life.

God works in God's own way, and while Jesus shows us everything we need to know about God, we are still left at the graveside wondering, is this all? But if we can trust a Jesus with these little glimpses of eternity surely we can trust that he loves the whole world in all its variety of beliefs and customs, and we can trust him with the biggest mystery of all – what happens after we die. In the meantime, let us work at what we are called to do NOW, so that goodness and righteousness and justice in our generation become eternal too. And we know, God will never leave us, EVER.