

JOHN 11:1-45
WHY DO WE WEEP?

Here are some photos of life at its hardest; how do you respond? Is there something here that



makes you angry? Is there something here that makes you laugh and dance with joy, though I doubt that? Is there something here that makes you cry? The war in Syria has lasted over 5 years, and has created millions of refugees in Lebanon, people who are waiting for the war to end, their life is on hold, they are wanting to go home, and a generation of children has lost an education. There are millions of people who are poor across the world: there are stories from Africa of poverty and exploitation, of people who are poor and their children are suffering and dying and it makes us sad to see;

we are angry too that some are poor while others make themselves rich at their expense; does it make you react



enough to take away one of these campaign-cards and send it back to Tearfund to speak up for those who have no voice of their own? What makes you weep? There are people who are victims of



abuse or crime, who are homeless, who are in need in other ways? There are people who suffer and others who die and we weep with those who weep because we understand their sadness and suffering. What is it that causes us to weep?

Should Christians react to these things? I have heard some Christians counsel that we should simply accept all these things in our world as being God's will and we should just get on with the life He has given us without complaint or without any kind of reaction other than to accept this as the will of God. They argue that there is no need to show feelings on any of these matters because that demonstrates a lack of faith in the love and providence of God. I have heard these things said, but I don't believe them for a minute. Our reactions to these issues and to people who suffer in the world are part of being human; we are made to feeling emotion; we are made to experience joy and delight and profound happiness; we are made to experience despair, to weep, to be angry at injustice. Mabel's husband had just died very suddenly in his late 50's; we were planning his funeral and she said "I don't want to let myself down by crying at his funeral!" But to cry at the funeral of the love of her life for 30 years and more was the most natural thing in the world for Mabel to do; it is only human!

How does God react to a world like this? That is a massive question for us if we aspire to be people of faith. There was a time when our fathers suggested that God didn't feel these things at all, that He was somehow impassive! But our best clue to the answer to that question is to look at Jesus. How did Jesus react to life as He found it in the world when He came? How did Jesus react to the kind of events in our lives that we find hard? How does Jesus' reaction help us when we try to work out how we should react when life is hard for us? There are clues in John 11, the story of Lazarus.

We've already talked about the bare bones of the story. Jesus is on His travels and He hears that Lazarus is sick; the disciples expect that Jesus will go to Bethany to heal Lazarus, but He doesn't. He waits and then later He goes. He goes after He knows that Lazarus has died, but that somehow He is going to demonstrate the power and glory of God. "Lord, if..." (John 11:21) is Martha's reaction, something of a complaint; "if only...". How many times have we said "if only..." Mary, later says: "Lord, if..." (John 11:32) It's a situation fraught with emotion; two sisters have just watched their brother be sick and then die and Jesus was their friend and

surely He had power to heal Lazarus, but He wasn't there is time! We can understand all of that, surely; we can sympathise with that emotion; we've said it often enough to God in our prayers – "if only..."

We know what Jesus did. He went to Lazarus' grave and had the men roll the stone back from the entrance to the tomb. They objected. Lazarus had been dead for four days and there would be a smell; do you really want to do that? But Jesus insisted. "*Did I...*" (*John 11:40*) He prayed and then to the dead Lazarus He said: "*Laz...*" (*John 11:43f*) It was the quite extraordinary power of God at work to bring this man back from the dead, to restore him to life. Here is the power of Jesus at work; here is Jesus who says of Himself "*I am...*" (*John 11:25*) Here is the same power of God at work that will in a few weeks' time raise Jesus Himself from the dead. Lazarus would die again; Jesus has the power of an indestructible life; He truly is the resurrection and the life, the One who gives life to us and we have the hope of life eternal; the life of the age to come has broken into our world and we have the hope of heaven.

But we have not yet answered the question about God's reaction to our world. Well, let's look at Jesus and His reaction. A few times, John tells us how Jesus reacts to the situation He faces. He tells us that when Jesus saw Mary weeping for her brother, He was "*deeply moved*" and that when He walked towards the grave we are famously told that "*Jesus wept!*" As He went to tomb, again John tells us that He was "*deeply moved*". Is this Jesus unfeeling? Is this Jesus impassive, uncaring? No, here is Jesus feeling deeply the situation of His friends and weeping alongside them, feeling for them, weeping with them, and showing His deepest feelings out in the open.

Why does He weep? Does He weep because He is powerless to help His friends, or feeling hopeless because all there is for them is bleak despair? Not that! Does He weep because death is the winner in this battle? Not that. Does He weep because He has no answers to the questions and complaints of His friends when they tell Him "if only..."? It can be none of these because He is about to turn the world upside down and raise Lazarus, about to bring him back to life. These cannot be the reasons for His tears. Why does He weep? He weeps because He sees His friends in pain. He weeps because He watches Martha and Mary grieve. He could have avoided that – true, but He chose not to for a greater reason! He watches them hurt and He hurts with them; He shares their pain and their grief and He weeps alongside them as they weep. This is the caring, compassionate Jesus, who shares their pain and who weeps with them.

There is something profound here about God. Where is God when we hurt? Does He not care? The answer is that God is right there with us when we hurt and that God cares profoundly about our well-being. God has tears in His heart when His children are hurt; God feels with us and for us when we are in the most difficult situations of our lives. He has the power to change things for us; He has the power to prevent hard things happening, but He chooses to let the world in all its pain run its course and He chooses to allow us to face some hard things in life. But in doing that He commits Himself to be right there with us and to share our pain! I believe that is most profound implication for us of this story and of Jesus weeping with Martha and Mary; this is what God is like; this is what Jesus is like for us, weeping not because He is powerless to help us, but weeping because He feels our pain.

Why do we weep? Death is the last taboo subject in our culture; we don't talk about it very much and we have all kinds of euphemisms to cover over the reality. We have hope; our hope is sponsored by Jesus' words about Himself – "*I am...*" (*John 11:25f*) These words have inspired hope in Christian hearts for 2000 years, hearing about Jesus as the resurrection and the life, hearing that the life of the age to come has broken into our world and will take us beyond this world into the very presence of God; we call it heaven. That is our hope for life and death. Contrast with words of bleak emptiness of the philosophers of this world who have nothing to offer beyond "thanks for the memories!" We have a hope and nothing can take that

hope away from our hearts and minds as we believe Jesus and hope in Him and that hope becomes an anchor for our souls as we look at the hard things of our world; it is a hope that includes the notion of a new heaven and a new earth, everything being made new, no more tears, pain and everything is made new.

Why do we weep? Some suggest that having this hope in our hearts and minds then we should not weep; we should smile serenely as if all of the hard things we face come as God's will and we will not feel pain. Why do we weep? Tears are our natural reaction to the life we live. Do you know these words of Dylan Thomas: *"Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light."* Thomas was not a man of faith, but there are times when these words sum up my reaction to what I see in the world; it makes me weep to see my friends in pain; it makes me angry to see a suffering world; I get it that there is something not right at times and there are times when I do not want to go gently, but I want to go with a sense of anger and outrage and tears at what I see in the world. To get to the resurrection, Jesus had to walk the road to the cross. I have stood in Toul Sleng, Cambodia's version of Auschwitz, and have seen rows and rows of photos of children and adults killed in the Killing Fields of the 1970's and I have burned with anger and have been heartbroken with tears at such cruelty and pain! This is what it means to be human, to feel pain, our own and others; that is how I should react and when we don't react like that, something profound is lost!

We live in a world full of fear and uncertainty; we're not sure what will happen next; hope is in short supply. But Christians have two hopes: firstly, we have the hope of heaven that comes from Jesus *"the resurrection and the life"* and that hope should live in our hearts, deep and strong. Secondly, we have the hope that God feels our pain, that Jesus wept, that He was *"deeply moved"* by the plight of His friends, that He is same with us, feels our pain, our grief, our sorrow, our fears, our despair, our uncertainty, and He weeps with us. It's OK to weep, to cry, to be frightened, to feel weak. Jesus weeps with us: He cares for us; He walks with us; we are not alone! Thanks be to God for these two glorious hopes that He has set in our hearts.