

## Worcester Cathedral

### Lent 5: Sung Eucharist (John 11.1-45)

*Stephen Edwards, Dean of Worcester*

Next Sunday our gospel passage will open with the words, 'The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Saint Matthew'. During the days which follow in Holy Week we shall follow the passion of Jesus Christ - his suffering, death and his resurrection. But today the suffering that is presented to us is not just Christ's but also that of his close friends Mary and Martha. If next week brings us close to Jesus's passion then today brings us close to his compassion. For in this remarkable and poignant and vivid story of the resurrection of Lazarus, we experience the sharing of suffering, the intensity and passionate nature of that suffering, and Christ's identification with the depths of human experience.

Suffering is part of the human condition - it is common to us all, and it is our personal experience of suffering which affects our response to it. For some the levels of suffering are unbearable; and for others, necessity causes a resilience; for others suffering is so constant that it becomes numb. For others suffering is normalised to the point of indifference. The stresses of life, and the ever-present troubles of the world can mean that our ability to suffer with others is tested to its limit.

Such *compassion*, suffering *with*, is an emotion which is more than words and cries, it is a bodily reaction from the very depths of our being. The physical reaction to our standing alongside others is manifested in tears and cries. The first century Roman poet Juvenal described tears as 'the noblest part of our emotions' - so fundamental to our humanity are the tears of sorrow.

The tears of Jesus are described here in today's gospel passage in what is often quoted as the shortest verse in the Bible. In the translation before us today we have four words, 'Jesus began to weep', but in other versions it is simply, 'Jesus wept'. Literally Jesus shed tears - a physical reaction to the suffering, not just of Martha and Mary but his own. Before we hear of Jesus weeping, we hear too that he was greatly disturbed in spirit. His reactions are not only of personal grief and empathy with friends, but of deep disturbance within his body prepares for the great power which is about to come forth from him.

Archbishop William Temple in his commentary on John's gospel says,

'some antagonism is mingled with his sympathy, and the tension finds expression through inarticulate sounds and physical tremors ... he is preparing for a mighty act of power. His *signs* were not wrought without cost to him'.

The connection between emotion and body is made visible and therefore obvious to others through tears but within us, our passion, our suffering, our *compassion*, our suffering *with*, forms deep within us a reaction which can inhabit body, mind and soul.

Like so many others I experienced this bodily reaction to mental and emotional pressure last September when I broke down and was signed off. When I say 'like many others', I know that my experience is shared by many, many people within this community. In the months of my time off I received letters and I shared conversations with many who opened up about their own mental struggles – some telling me for the first time of their past, and all held in confidence and with compassion.

My illness and fragility were helped in the obvious ways of support for the cathedral, colleagues and staff rallying, and the excellence of my GP and counsellor. But alongside these were the equally strong, equally necessary acts of love, words of kindness, vulnerable conversations and the most powerful wave of prayer I think I have known. I am so thankful for everything that you did.

In the exhaustion of facing my fragility I am thankful to be able to say quite honestly that I did not lose my faith. I was as reliant on the everlasting arms as I was on every other piece of support which was in place. But I had no ability to articulate that faith, no words or even desire to pray, and a total absence of knowing what to do or how to partake in worship.

On the first Sunday that Tony and I attended Mucknell Abbey for the Eucharist, we sat in the balcony where nobody could see me and I was dumb as well as numb. In front of us was a large icon of Christ. I stared at it throughout the service and I heard the voice of Jesus saying to me, simply, 'you came'.

I could not sing nor pray, I received the sacrament in hope but without understanding, and I know that all Christ wanted was my presence. I was there, I heard him say, 'you came and that is enough'. I came to worship and in that act of community and sharing I was loved without words, beyond words.

As my healing continued it was also the case that my medication kicked in – one of the side effects of these particular pills being that I was unable to cry. There was an irony in my inability to cry at a time when emotions were at their strongest and my body was most reactive to all I was going through.

Perhaps because I could not cry, I remember being moved by the kindnesses which were shown. One day whilst walking Jorja on College Green, a Cathedral chorister, who was with a group of school friends, saw me and shouted out, 'Hello Dean Stephen. Get well soon!' If I could have, I would've cried. It was these connections with human kindness which finally brought my prayer life and deeper sense of Christ's presence with me.

So much of Christ's healing presence is physical – his laying on of hands, his gut compassion, his crying, his touch. So much of what we go through in life is made manifest in our bodies. And yet so little value is placed on this physical experience of faith, of emotion, of life that we shy away from listening to our bodies or from allowing ourselves to let heart overtake mind.

The raising of Lazarus engages us not simply because it is a story of hope – the resurrection of loved ones which we look to with confidence and sure hope. It engages us because it brings in every emotion and physical response to suffering, grief, and joyful relief.

From Martha's anger, 'Lord if you had been here' and then Mary's repetition of this deep frustration at Jesus' seeming absence, and then the Lord's reaction of being greatly disturbed and deeply moved, his weeping, the others wailing, and then the commanding shout of Jesus, 'Lazarus, come out!' – all this engages our body, our senses, as well as our mind. Salvation – healing - is an encounter with the compassion of our Lord which encompasses our whole being.

Too often we protect ourselves from excessive compassion because the burden is too great. Listening to our bodies is essential to mental wellbeing as much as our physical health. And when we hear that Jesus wept, that he sheds tears for himself and his friends, we are given an example that we too are called to a life of compassion.

The cost of compassion can be weariness and were it not for our faith in the God of hope we might well be overwhelmed and exhausted. But hear again the words of the psalmist, 'Out of the deep have I called to thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice.

The Lord does hear and, as he said to Martha, so he says to us 'Do you believe this?' Like Martha, we reply, simply, 'Yes Lord, I believe'.