

Today, our Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings are all readings that are often used at funerals in the Episcopal Church.

It is a bit strange to hear funeral readings outside of a funeral. Yet, those readings are extremely appropriate today as we celebrate All Saints. After all, All Saints celebrates all those Christians who have gone before us, all the faithful departed who lived and died in the faith of Jesus Christ.

There are always mixed feelings on All Saints. Joy and thanksgiving for the good examples of those who have finished this life in faith. And yet, that joy is often tinged with grief, and we remember the saints we have known, those faithful Christians we have encountered in our lives who have preceded us in death.

So, this morning, when we hear John 11 used as something other than a funeral reading, at first it may seem out of place. And yet, the truth is, John 11 is about much more than just giving comfort to those who are bereaved at the death of a loved one. Yes, John 11 is a great funeral text. But it's so much more. John 11 reveals to us the depths of God's love for us.

We only read the last part of an extended narrative in the 11th chapter of John, beginning with verse 32 of chapter 11. But the runup to our Gospel begins way back in verse 1 of John 11.

We're told there that Jesus' friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha who are also close to Jesus. So, the sisters send a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."¹

They probably expect Jesus to drop everything and come running to their town of Bethany. If you had the power to heal the sick and one of your good friends was sick, then you'd want to get to them and heal them ASAP.

But Jesus intentionally delays going. He stays put for 2 days before setting off to see his friends.

But after 2 days, Jesus decides to get moving. And as they're leaving for Bethany, Jesus informs his disciples that he knows that Lazarus has already died. The implication is that he has gained this knowledge supernaturally. Jesus has more information than his disciples have. But he also knows what he plans to do when he arrives in Bethany.

Now this is something that happens to us all the time. We want God to do something. And usually, we want God to do it NOW! We want action. We want God to do the right thing and do it according to our timetable. But that's not what's happening here. And that's often not what happens for us. God's timing is very different from ours. God has more information than we do. In fact, God's got all the information there is. And God always acts in our ultimate best interest, not in what we think is our best interest at the time.

¹ Jn 11:3

So, Jesus gets to Bethany and finds that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days. Jesus rolls into town, and he's too late. And the older sister Martha goes out to meet him. And there is a real edge to what she says. She says flat out, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."²

Her younger sister, Mary, makes the same accusation a few verses later at the beginning of our Gospel lesson. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."³

The subtext is clear. What these two sisters are basically saying is "Lord, where the hell have you been? Why didn't you get here sooner? Why didn't you do something to prevent this?"

That's a wonderfully human reaction. We do the same thing. Why? Why, Lord? You have the power to do something about every problem in the world. And yet you didn't step in and fix things. Why? Lord, why are children born with birth defects? Lord, why do you let terrorists kill innocent people? Lord, why have you let a virus kill 700,000 people in our country? Why? Why? Why?

Martha and Mary speak honestly for all of us. "Why?"

They're saying two things here. First, the two sisters are saying, 'Lord, you have the power. You have the power to prevent something like this from happening.'

The other people think Jesus MIGHT have that power. A few verses into our Gospel lesson they ask, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"⁴ They ask if Jesus might have had the power to stop Lazarus from dying if he had arrived earlier.

But that's not what these 2 sisters are saying. These sisters KNOW that Jesus has the power.

They say, point blank, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Lord, you have the power to prevent something like this from happening.

But in their statement of faith in Jesus' power, there's also an underlying accusation. First, they say you have the power. But second, they make something of an accusation. You have the power, but you didn't use it. Why? Don't you care? Don't you love us?

And that was the tough question 20 years ago on September 11. God, why didn't you stop those terrorists from flying those planes into those buildings?

² Jn 11:21

³ Jn 11:32

⁴ Jn 11:37

And it's been a tough question these past 20 months as we've watched people get sick and die from a worldwide pandemic. God, why didn't you stop the COVID virus in its tracks before anyone died from it.

Lord, you have the power, but you didn't use it! Why? Don't you care? Don't you love us?

And I could give you all kinds of intellectual, theological answers to these tough questions. I could launch into a discourse about the freedom we're given, freedom to choose good or choose evil. And some people do great harm when they choose the evil. And that makes a certain amount of sense up here [point to head].

And I could talk about God giving freedom to nature. And that freedom means that sometimes there are destructive storms that arise. And that freedom means that sometimes there are destructive plagues and pandemics that arise. And again, that makes a certain amount of sense up here [point to head].

But the tougher place to deal with these questions is in here [point to heart]. These questions hit us in the emotions, in the heart. It's one thing to answer them rationally in the head. But we still struggle in our hearts. God, don't you care? God, don't you love us?

And the answer we see in John 11 is so important. John tells us, "Jesus began to weep."⁵ Or in other translations, "Jesus wept."

That's our answer. Jesus wept.

In the person of Jesus Christ, God knows what it means to be a human being. Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions. In the face of death and tragedy and pain and loss, Jesus wept.

God does care. God does love us. In fact, God shed tears.

Jesus wept at the grave of his friend. It was clear to everyone around him. They said, "See how he loved him!"⁶

Yes, a few verses later, Jesus would raise his friend Lazarus from death. That's a wonderful happy ending. But in the meantime, in the face of the grief of the two sisters, Jesus wept.

How do we know God cares? Jesus wept. Jesus shed tears.

And more than that, Jesus shed blood. A couple of weeks after shedding these tears, Jesus shed his blood on the cross. He did this willingly, out of love for us.

⁵ Jn 11:35

⁶ Jn 11:36

Jesus had the power to prevent his own death. But he didn't use it. When his disciples tried to stop his arrest, he said, "Don't you realize that I could ask my Father for thousands of angels to protect us, and he would send them instantly?"⁷

But Jesus didn't use that power. He didn't call down thousands of angels to intervene. Instead, he shed his blood.

We ask, "Does God care? Does God love us?" In reply, God sheds tears. And God sheds his blood. And by doing so, God is telling us that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Death is not something we have to be afraid of.

In Jesus Christ, God shed tears and he shed blood to overcome the power of death in this broken, and sometimes terrible, world. Because of that, we can trust in his love for us.

Jesus knows our pain and our grief. Jesus knows our fear and confusion. Jesus took upon himself the worst that life can possibly dish out.

And in doing so, he opens the door for us into eternal life. One day, as Revelation promises, "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

God promises an eventual happy ending. Resurrection and eternal life. But for now, we still experience pain. We still shed tears.

One day, there'll be no more tears, no more grief, no more pain. But for now, we can be thankful that we follow a Lord who fully experienced our pain and grief. And then he did something about it.

When we face acts of terror, we know God still loves us and that he still reigns. When we face plagues and pandemics, we know that God still loves us and that he still reigns. How do we know? Jesus wept.

Jesus shed his tears.

Jesus shed his blood.

Jesus brings us life.

⁷ Mt 26:53