

Goodbyes & Rememberings

Sermon on John 11: 32-44

We all know how very hard it is to say goodbye. Grief, anger, confusion, fear, pain and suffering are involved when we have to let go and bid farewell. Most of us don't deal very well with that. Most of us don't handle parting and being separated skilfully. There is a surprising anxiety about the ends of relationships, about leaving and parting and changes...

Throughout the Christian churches November has always been a month of Goodbyes and remembering. It begins with All Saints when we observe a holy day in honour of all the saints, known and unknown. People visit cemeteries in order to lay down flowers and candles on the graves of beloved family members.

In the Anglican Church All Saints extends somehow to Remembrance Sunday which always is the first Sunday in November. This year especially the end of World War 1 was reflected. It ended 100 years ago. And other wars followed... big and small. But no war is small if you've lost a sister, a father, a brother, a mother, a husband, a wife, a child... When loss has to be suffered every conflict is a big and significant one.

In Germany wars, deaths of soldiers and civil population, and the admonition to peace are reflected on on the second last Sunday of the church year – always two weeks before Advent. And one week before Advent, which is today's Sunday, especially Germany and Switzerland have a general "commemoration of the dead" Sunday. November, as some say, is a quiet month... all has to do with letting go, remembering and the commitment to peace.

I remember saying goodbye to both my parents when they died.

I remember the questions which came with their deaths...

...would my father still be alive had he cared more about going to the doctor? Would we have been able to discover the first signs of my mother's beginning dementia had we paid her more attention? More visits?

Should we have been there more?

... a sentence that is most crucial in today's sermon text: **if you had been here...**

If you had been here, my brother would not have died...

This is the sentence of Martha and Mary after they had watched their brother Lazarus fall ill, get worse and worse, and finally die.

Martha's house was the one where Jesus and his friends often came and were refreshed by her wonderful hospitality. It was here where Mary sat at his feet in adoration and worship. These two women were Jesus' really good friends.

They felt they could rely on Jesus. They felt, he was part of the family... They had sent out word to Jesus that Lazarus needed help, they'd hoped Jesus would just come and heal their brother. In their hearts they were convinced that Jesus would come and help them as fast as he could. So they waited... Any moment they thought he would come...

Jesus got the message, heard their request, knew their hearts' desire, loved them, all three, but didn't go... He stayed two more days in the place where he was. Hard to believe. A loving friend who knows your need intentionally delays coming to see you?

Four days later, the story tells us, Jesus said: Let us go to Judea...

We then learn that it was dangerous for him to go there, because there was already much hostility towards him among the Jews. The disciples try to warn him... However this time Jesus is convinced. I am going there...

When Jesus arrived Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. The mourners were there. The sightseers were there. The nosy and the concerned were there. In those days there was always a crowd when someone had died...

And Martha ran to Jesus saying: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." (v 21) And a little later Mary said exactly the same sentence... (v32) ... in other words: Where were you? What took you so long? Didn't you get the message? Why the delay?

Jesus understood the pain and grief. He knew their hurting hearts. The anxieties and fears. The pain about the loss of a loved one... To Martha he said: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die. Do you believe this?"

And Martha gives one of the first affirmations of faith: "Yes, Lord," she says, "I believe you are the Christ..." Then she ran away to fetch her sister.

Mary wept when she came. Jesus wept too. They all were deeply disturbed.

Jesus went to the tomb. He'd been warned... there was already a stench of death... after four days...

When the stone had been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb, Jesus prayed to God, and with his God at his side confronted death. Life was about to show the power of resurrection...

And all the people gathered there that day would see it.

Life was about to cross the big gap that separates the dead from those with everlasting life.

In the quietness of the garden everyone could hear Jesus call Lazarus.

"Lazarus, come forth!"

And death had to turn him loose. The grave had to let him go.

"Untie him and let him go," Jesus said to the people, and meant much more than just taking off the cloths...

There they were, in that cemetery. Confronted with death, and offered new life, a new approach to life and death if you like.

Lazarus had died. He had finished his course. Lazarus had begun a new existence as memory, and as future hope...

He had been wrapped in grave clothes and was bound for his new reality.

When Jesus came and spoke new life into a formerly dead body, Lazarus was stinking from the stench of decay. And as much as Jesus was able to do, he didn't perform the miracle to offer another new beginning to Lazarus but to all people witnessing the victory of life over death.

There was Lazarus with a new span of life given to him. But they all knew that one day he would die. So what Jesus was teaching the people then and is teaching us now is: learn that you can deal with changes... don't sit forever at the graves of loved ones. Say goodbye to the body... Don't insist on things having to remain the same forever. Allow changes to happen in your life. Embrace them. Accept things when they become different, when they vary, when they transform... Don't hold onto what you've always known, let go...

With the Lazarus miracle Jesus tries to make people fit for life and resurrection. He wants them to look toward tomorrow, to get fresh visions and ideas. And probably he prepares them for his own death...

When loved ones die, we have to lose our image of them as we had always known them. We have to let go our picture of a caring, nurturing, cooking, working, laughing and praying person, and see them as a child of a loving God. If we can let the physical person go, we get more of them.

They are then carried in our hearts... and there they will live forever.

We can talk to them whenever we want to, if we accept the new way in which they continue to exist. They are a new being... They are free... And if we believe in resurrection they are always here...

Graveyards are not the final stop.

Just because the people in our story met Jesus in the graveyard, they didn't remain there, for Jesus conquered death and brought new life.

Jesus gained the victory and turned a weeping crowd into a rejoicing community. Jesus gave glad hearts to those who had been sad. Jesus dried tearful eyes and put smiles on people's faces and hopes in people's lives. And he continues to do so.

With Lazarus Jesus made an example of resurrection out of a man who had been dead for four days. Jesus turned a funeral into a celebration. He put belief into the hearts of many who had doubted him before. He gave them a foretaste of glory divine – and shared with them and shares with us the secret that every closed eye is not dead. In Jesus, life is always abundant and eternal...

It doesn't always need a Lazarus raised from the dead for us to see that the reality of God shown in Jesus has once and for all altered human experience of life and death.

Resurrection is not something we need only in times of dying and death. It is something that wants to infuse our whole lives and beings... in good times and in sad.

We need to embrace the resurrection and the life offered in Jesus not only in times of death but also in the daily moments of our lives, because all moments are lived in the face of death.

We need to learn what it means for our lives that Jesus' power over death has forever put the world under God's care and power.

Whatever happens, happens within the realm of God. Whether we live or whether we die, we are all part of God's loving purposes for humankind... In this world or in the next, we are all held in God's caring hand and we are forever connected with each other in love, nothing else but love...

There is a land of the living and a land of the dead,
and the bridge between the two is love,
the only thing that lasts,
the only thing that makes sense...

Life is not always fair. And life is never easy.
And love is the only possible answer or reaction to suffering and hardship, to mourning
and grief.
Love when nothing else holds and lasts...
Love when all else falls, fails and is unsure!

Let us let go, let us remember and let us live, because we are loved.

Prayer

We entrust to you, eternal God,
those times when we can see only shadows
and lose sight of the hope to come;
the times when suffering seems so senseless,
life so fragile, war so unstoppable and death so permanent.
Bless us with the assurance that you are in all things,
the tragic and the beautiful,
the nightmare and the dream,
the light and the darkness.
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ
the peace of the world, today, tomorrow and forever.
Amen.

Music

Candle Lights...