

Thanksgiving for those who have died. 2009

Texts:

Poem: Stop all the clocks by W. H. Auden

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

*Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.*

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.*

*The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

Bible reading: Matthew 11:25-30

I hope the first reading today was not too roar or too shocking for you
- I am aware that many of you have come here this evening feeling vulnerable
- and her your grief is very recent or whether this service itself will bring back
painful feelings from further in the past
- this service is intended to be part of an on-going healing process for us all

But it would seem to me that this healing;
- can only start from a place of honesty.

What Auden has given us, in my view, is permission to be ruthlessly honest about
what it really feels like to lose a loved one
- whether a spouse, a friend, a child, a parent.

This is, quite simply what it is like for many:

- everything is gone!
- There is no point in anything anymore without the loved one in the world
- Nothing has meaning
- Nothing has value

And these are powerful sentiments and powerful feelings

- and go against the grain of many aspects of our English culture
- where we are expected always to cope with quiet dignity

and therefore such feelings, if they do come, can be hard to share with others. I wonder if we feel pressure to keep them to ourselves for fear of shocking, or upsetting.

And yet this is, for some, just how it feels:

- rage, fear, betrayal, a sense of unredeemable loss

Of course that is not all there is to say on the subject,

- (and I want to offer you something more positive in a moment)
- but I do wonder whether it might be the place to start
- simply to acknowledge the truth
- to be honest
- to say it to someone!

You may remember C.S.Lewis' response to the kindly Vicar who was trying to offer him some comfort after the death of his wife:

The Vicar said something like: "Thank God for your faith, Jack, to make sense of things at times like these"

To which Lewis replied (and excuse my French)

"No no no! none of it makes any sense – it's all just a bloody mess"

Such feelings, it seems, were almost completely new to Lewis who had lived a very ordered academic bachelor existence up to that point.

His faith did, indeed, help him as time went on (though only after quite a lot of reassessing what faith was really about)

- but right at that point it really was all just a bloody mess.
- (and it must have felt good to say so – to the Vicar!)

And if that has been, or still is, your experience, then all I would want to say is:

- that is OK – that is quite reasonable – and you are quite normal!

On one level, there really are no other words of comfort

- it is as it feels – terrible and awful
- let us have the courage simply to be honest and real about it.

If you want a biblical model, just try Jesus on the cross:

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me"

No, that was not the full story for him either

- but it was clearly Jesus' experience and feelings at the time.
- And he was not afraid to express it – in public
- He was not afraid that his followers would see this as some sort of failure on his part
- Even some failure of faith
- it was simply the truth of his experience at the time
- And he was honest and humble enough to declare it

Well, honesty may be the start but it is not the end of the story for us either.

You may or may not be able, yet, to see anything beyond the painful place you are in but there are two other things I would like to offer which may be of some value today which I am drawing out of our second reading:

- a beautiful expression of the love and gentleness with which Christ reaches out to those who are suffering

The first is compassion:

- having dared to be honest with yourself
- and having heard the gentle attitude of Jesus towards us
- please be gentle with yourself!

Compassion starts with ourselves.

There will, no doubt, at certain times be voices in our heads telling us to “pull ourselves together” and to “get up and get on with things”

- and there may, indeed come a time when something like that is helpful

But there will also be times when this is not the voice of compassion, not the voice of gentleness

- and we will need to stop judging ourselves harshly
- be gentle with ourselves
- and make very big allowances for the enormous toll that grief takes on us.

After all what has happened is very big

- and it will need a lot of time and space and gentleness
- for healing to come

So please be compassionate with yourself

- and you will come through with a greater compassion for others too.

But the second is trust:

The wounding of our capacity to trust others at such times is also very common

- it is not anyone’s fault
- there is no betrayal of trust here.

But our capacity to trust can, nevertheless, be wounded

- simply because someone who we relied on, to a greater or lesser extent, is no longer there to be relied on
- suddenly and sometimes dramatically.

And this can throw us in our relationships with others

- There may well be the tendency to close down to anyone except the closest of family

And again, this may simply be a natural reaction to the shock of what has happened.

But the ability to trust again

- or should I say, to begin to trust different people
- will be very important

We will need it, because we do need others at whatever stage of life we are at

And for those for many of us, it may well begin with learning to trust God once again.

Of course there are times when we are quite reasonably tempted to blame God for all that has happened

- and that is OK too!
- Lots of people in the bible did it!
- God is not upset by that!

But if we can just begin to hear the voice of God saying to us:

“I never promised to make it easy, to wrap you in cotton wool and protect you from all the experiences that humans have

- but I have promised – to be with you in it
- to walk alongside you every inch of the way
- to share your joys and your sorrows
- to ache with you when you ache in the long solitary evenings
- to cry with you when you cry at the most awkward of times
- to share your anger and your pain, however it expresses itself
- to listen to your rage and never to judge you

And so, come to me, you who are weighed down and heavy laden and I will give you rest

- for I am gentle and humble in heart
- my yoke is easy and burden for you will be light”

If we can only just begin to hear this voice breaking through the many other voices we may hear.

Then, we may be able to begin to build up our ability to trust once again

- to let others, new people into our lives to support us and to care for us
- and of course, in time, to support and care for them.

It is OK to be honest

Please be gentle with yourselves

It is possible that trust, and through it a rich and joyful life could be built up once again.

Let this be our prayer for one another in these times.