

Tragic losses and miraculous rescues

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Epiphany + 8: Isa 55 Ps 92 1 Cor 15 51-58 Lk 6 39-49

One of the commentators I read for today's sermon was Maria La Sala. She writes: 'When I became a mother, a friend sent me a card that included a sentence from the King James Version of today's reading from 1st Corinthians: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." In the weeks that followed, we got little sleep and did a good deal of "changing." However, the text also had a deeper resonance. Paul presents the Christian hope of resurrection in the face of the inevitability of death, and for a parent holding a vulnerable newborn, the question of life and death, of mystery and miracle, is ever present.'

I'm struck by the way talk about death so often involves thoughts about vulnerable new life. And not just in our tradition. In the Church, our funeral services end with the Nunc Dimittis; the Song of Simeon. When he finally held the promised Christ child in his arms, Simeon told God 'I'm happy to die now'. Death and new life are somehow linked. Again, last week, we read Paul's metaphor of life after death in terms of us planting the seed of the life we're leaving, and God calling a new and different resurrection body from that seed. Our mortal body and our resurrection body are not the same, yet they're somehow linked; there's a continuity which is influenced by the fruits we bear in our present life. Jesus teaches about this today in his parable of the good and bad trees, and the fruit they produce.

But back to last week for a moment; Paul gave us the image of our death being like a seed we plant which sprouts, but in

doing so, dies and is lost. What sprouts from it is not the same as the seed, but it's definitely in continuity with it. He was clear that we're not going to rise as some other creature. To mess with a silly phrase that's doing the rounds, 'not different, not quite same same'. Remember how the risen Jesus walked with his two sad disciples on the Emmaus road yet they didn't recognise him until he did something they recognised; the way he broke the bread. The fruit of his life – what Jesus did and taught – that's how they recognised him.

So I think Paul's point is made; our natural world proclaims it in the life cycles we observe: new life rises out of old, old life produces new. Today, Paul completes this lesson, his most extended teaching about resurrection. 'Listen, I will tell you a mystery.' For Paul, *mysterion* refers to the hidden counsel or purposes of God, something you can't know simply through rational problem solving, but only through revelation, proclamation, or fulfillment. Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7

Throughout chapter 15, Paul argues for the bodily resurrection of the dead. I confront it every day in the Apostle's Creed; *I believe in the resurrection of the body*. Paul is convinced that Christ's resurrection was not an exception but the crucial precedent – the first fruits of many for those who believe. Our perishable body will put on imperishability too; our mortal body will put on immortality too.

What does this mean for us? Today in our service, we have a focus on healing – and heaven knows how vital that is. What does it mean for me when I bring my illness or the illness of those I pray for every day to someone who will anoint me and pray with me? If I believe that this life is all there is, that can paralyze my hope or smother it in desperation. Depression can then add to any other issues.

But **if we believe* that God is calling me beyond the gradual deterioration of my ageing – **that there is hope – *we can* honestly say to the people we accompany on their journey from

this world that we will be re-united with loved ones – *that death is far more than just a merciful end to suffering – if we can take hold of all that hope together, then our anointing and laying on of hands today is a sign that we are journeying together towards healing; journeying together past death towards God's tears of joy for us; God's arms open to welcome us in an embrace of pure love, joy and peace. We are set free from our lonely sickness; set free from our alienation.

This is not a call to squeeze our eyes shut and believe in the tooth fairy. It's a call to consciously choose freedom and life in the midst of the inevitable aches and pains of our mortal existence; to make life choices based on a determination to be free.

The collect prayer for today holds before us an image of our being set free from bondage to sin – something I'd call the chains of isolation – being set free from that bondage so we can choose to dedicate our freedom to God's service – and that service means caring for all God's creatures in need. *Almighty God, you have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts and freed us from bondage to sin: give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service, that we and all people may be brought to the glorious liberty of the children of God. Amen*

Both tragic losses and miraculous rescues can inspire people to dedicate their lives to a cause. If it's a tragedy, they want to make sure this never happens to anyone else. If it's a miraculous rescue, then they dedicate their lives to seeing that other people have that unexpected freedom made available to them too. These are people whose extraordinary circumstances have untied them from a normal, routine life. They've been set unexpectedly free, somehow, to focus on their particular cause; their mission. And many of them achieve extraordinary things.

Can we pray for this freedom for ourselves and our community – keeping the prayer of the day and the readings from Isaiah,

the Psalmist and Paul open before us during the ministry of healing?

Almighty God, you have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts and freed us from bondage to sin: give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service, that we and all people may be brought to the glorious liberty of the children of God. Amen

Today, we offer prayers particularly for survivors of child-sexual-abuse whose wounds have been re-opened by the events of the past week, and for Christians like us struggling with the shame and grief that our family is like this.