

All Saints Sunday 2018

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I used to be a teacher and one of the most valuable lessons I learned as a teacher is the power of never asking pupils to do something that you wouldn't be willing to do yourself. Do the exercise that you have set them and there is no more powerful lesson than that. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in didactic mode in Matthew's Gospel, asks of us, of his would-be Saints, some extraordinary feats: feats of humanity.

Depending which Gospel you are reading we are sometimes left with a little room for doubt about just how much of this very embodied humanity our Jesus really participates in. In Matthew and Luke's Gospels we begin a story of his life with his family, his conception, his birth.

But take John's Jesus: he appears mysteriously from above, he speaks in gnomic utterances that bespeak an otherworldly knowledge. He says his disciples cannot understand it, but his home is elsewhere, that we cannot go where he goes. He seems, in all the Gospels but especially in John's, sometimes to have supernatural knowledge of other peoples' minds and then, especially in John's, sometimes repeats himself so boringly that we wonder if he knows that other minds exist.

All the Gospels are a negotiation between showing us that Jesus is truly divine and showing us that Jesus is truly human, but John's problematises it more than any other. There he does carry his own cross, unlike in Luke, and there he talks back to his mother, but quite often he doesn't seem to us like a real human being.

But Jesus will not ask us to do anything that he will not do himself. When he says 'blessed are those who mourn', he means it. So we may ask ourselves what real human being, begged three times to visit a dying friend, would three times refuse. And we may well ask what else could they have said to him, when he at least arrived in Bethany, but 'If you had been here my brother would not have died.'

My brothers and sisters, we can have no idea why God does not spare the innocent. 'The Knockdown Question' as the poet Les Murray calls it, and he goes on: 'the answer to that is not in the same world as the question, so you would shrink from me in terror if I could answer it'.

But in this world, the world to whom the Lord addresses the Beatitudes, loss is real, however it is theorised. And so, it is in John's Gospel, the one where it is open to the greatest question, that we have the greatest affirmation. And so, for Martha's bereavement, for his own, for all that isn't and can't be, all for which there is no remedy or justice in this world, for the chasm of human knowledge between what is now, the mourning, the hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and what he knows will be – his death and ours, his resurrection and ours, the consummation of all things in him, the joy that eye has not seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, for the sheer heartbreak of the human condition: Jesus wept.

The idea of a divinity who rides in and sorts everything out before our wondering eyes: that exists. There need be no Beatitudes, not in a world of the heretical god of sheer volition or of the pagan *deus ex machina* searing through a tangled Greek plot. But that is no the God of the Jews, or of Christians. Will we rail against our God?

Probably: children do, when they don't understand. But our God doesn't promise us that we'll understand, he doesn't promise us that we won't be persecuted. His only promise is that we won't be alone. And we know we are not alone because Jesus wept.

Better: we know that we will **never** be alone. Because **Jesus** wept. Not your friend, who yesterday tends your wounds, today ignores your messages and next week blanks you in the street: Jesus. Seated at the right hand of the Father who has endured all that he asks us to endure and has carried it all to the eternal Godhead, where he lives forever to intercede for us. The Jesus who is the resurrection and the life: wept.

Our calling as Christians, St Paul says, is to laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep. Laughing? Easy. Laugh and the world laughs with you: winners. But weep, mourn? That says 'loser' and we - the semi-redeemed, would-be Christians, in love still with the world and our daily masks of fake human being - we will go to almost any length to avoid the taint of loserdom.

And then, there are the saints.

Mary of Bethany, weeping for her dead brother. The crowd, weeping for her dead brother. Another Mary, our patron, stands outside Jesus' tomb, pointlessly, weeping. Peter at his betrayal, realising the depth of his own failure and inadequacy, weeps bitterly. Paul can't seem so much as to jot down a postcard without floods coming to his eyes – weeping for his churches, for their quarrels and hardness of heart; for friendships

never to be renewed again in this life. St Monica weeps, heartsore for her wayward child. And in turn St Augustine weeps – first for Virgil’s Dido – a training in sorrow for that day when he finally learns to weep for himself.

Saints weep, because they are afraid to be real human beings instead of fake human beings. Ignatius, weeping as he celebrated the Mass, overcome by the beauty of worship and the profundity of God’s love. Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross – intellectual giants, spiritual heroes, political powerhouses, terrific writers: wept. Along with every mystic you can name. Ever heard of St. Snandulia? Me neither. Broke into a prison to tend the wounds of her tortured fellow Christians, and wept. One of our congregation, writing to a fellow mother, imprisoned without term, parted from her little child – writing letters to say the only thing that can be said: I weep that you weep.

The saints know that grief and trial, the things that the Lord calls us to in the hard lesson, are not add-ons to being human. It is being human. And there is now way out but through. John’s Jesus says so. No way to the Father except through me – through the scourging, the cross, the grave; through that humiliation called compassion.

Well, have you a better idea? Another way to fit us for heaven? Or are we so good at attending to one another, bearing with one another, living for one another that we don’t need sorrow to spur compassion? Could God have ordered the world in such a way that we were rescued from every brush with loss and suffering? The knockdown question. Could he? Why **would** he? We are masters of escape without his help. Masters of ‘keeping our distance’, ‘none of my business’ ‘what can I do?’ ‘I think I do enough’; masters of the intoxication of material comfort and superior status, of the intoxication of intoxication. We have plenty of escape.

The saints escaped nothing. They were spared nothing – not the suppurating sores of the destitute or the murderous rage of their torturers, nothing. They didn’t ask God to lift them out of these sorrows of being human. They asked him to abide with them as they went through them. ‘If you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ A rebuke, perhaps. And perhaps also an affirmation of a faith even more profound than the depth of the suffering. And now the saints stand, where death is no more; where mourning and crying and pain are no more. And God will do no less for each one of us – if we will let him. One way, only, to the heart of the divine compassion: unsparing solidarity. If it takes an eternity for us to learn it, then so much the worse for us. Oh,

God has an eternity, but in the words of our dear Fr Rowan, a living saint if anyone is:
'God will not wipe away our tears until we have learned to weep'.