

Sermon Notes

All Soul's Service Bath Abbey 2007

Lamentations 3:17-26, 31-33

John 5: 19-27

The passionate prayer of Lamentations reminds us that God gives no immunity from grief to those who believe.

The calm assured voice of Jesus reminds us that if there is any life for us in and through and after death it is life from God.

We do not have to preserve an uncontaminated soul in this life for the next.

We do need to be ready to receive the gift of Resurrection – in a new body; a fresh way of being – fit for purpose in heaven.

They sat around me at a tea table. Their combined ages must have been over 500 years. We were enjoying the cake and the sandwiches and jelly. I especially – because the Cholesterol Control officer wasn't with us.

Suddenly I was awakened out of munching my way through yet another deliciously forbidden cake by their laughter. They were chuckling about death and dying. The jokes and anecdotes flowed and I was amazed.

I had sat with most with them as their tears of fear and anguish flowed for the death of Dorothy, George, Masie, Ruth and Alex. This was their Lamentations Experience.

But now as people who had known the sharp path of grief they revealed to me the joy of God's life given for eternity.

I would not have believed it had I not seen it!

Easter People smile with the lines of grief carved into their faces.

A father and daughter get into conversation

Will I recognise Grandad when I get to heaven?

He knew why she asked. Her grandfather had died before she was born.

Will he look like his picture on Mum's dressing table?

It was a good question but he felt he could answer in the affirmative.

Yes I do believe there is recognition – there is absolute continuity when we die the gift of our uniqueness is transformed. God's image in us not obliterated; all that distorts it is removed. We are even more ourselves.

A long discussion followed.

But will he recognise me?

Yes I will introduce you her father answered flippantly.

There was a pause

But what makes you think you will be there?

For a moment her father was silenced and the answer came – God and Jesus have put in far too much work on my behalf in fact; on behalf of the whole world to have to remove my name tag from my room in heaven just because I have a choice whether to be there or not.

Rowan Williams was once asked what difference does belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus make to us as we contemplate old age and death? He replied

The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead tells us that God is a God who has infinite life in him. He relates to us. He shares that life with us. It is endless life. The end of my earthly life is not the end of God's relationship with me.

And there we leave it – with God. He is clear what sort of relationship we can have with him. He longs for this. But he awaits our response. He will not demand it.

But there's one thing more about heaven and God and us being there.

For me it is the most exciting possibility of all. Here is Paul writing to Christians in ancient Corinth

Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know only in part;

Then I will fully know

Even as I have been fully known.

One of the deep frustrations of our life is being misunderstood; not coming across the way we want to; confusing ourselves with who we are and finding other people just as confused.

Yet for all our life there is One who knows us fully; our Creator and Redeemer and that is the gift of heaven. Heaven is complete understanding; complete insight; complete everything.

May this be the experience of our dead

May this be the anticipation with which we live and die.