

The Ascension – YrA – 21 May 2023

Message – Being there in Loss and Grief

Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to love as you love us. **Amen.**

We are in the first year of our three year cycle of readings, The focus is on the gospel of Matthew. The attentive will have noticed that Luke authored both of our readings recounting the ascension, one might even say we had three accounts, as Luke talks of the ascension in his scene setting introduction to Acts before recounting the ascension in more detail.

Though the event is the ascension, that is not Luke's focus. The primary messages are twofold; one, we cannot know when Jesus will return, and two, we are called to be witnesses to Christ to the ends of the earth.

This is a considerably more inclusive and expansive vision than the apostles have grasped as they joyfully head back to Jerusalem to await 'power from on high.' The Holy Spirit was needed in abundance to guide the early church towards that inclusive and expansive vision. The Holy Spirit is still needed in abundance to create that inclusive and expansive church.

As the apostles headed back to Jerusalem, we notice a change in their attitude towards Jesus. They are now worshiping Christ. They now see Christ as more than merely human. Only God is worthy of worship. They have placed Christ on equal terms. It will take another three centuries to develop the doctrine of the Trinity.

The apostles return to Jerusalem with great joy. This is not the normal reaction to being separated from someone we love. There was clearly something different about the separation, the tangible evidence of a life beyond this life. The reality of the resurrection.

In my ministry, I have been drawn to supporting those who are grieving. And, in such a role, I get angry when those who claim to be providing pastoral support say that in death there is great joy. One might suggest that the apostles in their joy support the claim. This is the new reality that our faith embraces, there is a more glorious life beyond this life. This is a cause for joy.

However, Jesus's instructions to the apostles offer a counterpoint. The apostles are not to spend their time looking for Christ's return, they are to focus on the present and bringing the good news to all. Life is to be lived, in all its fullness, in the here and now, with vision and purpose.

The wounds of the resurrected Christ do not allow us to drift off into a spiritual existence in which the suffering of this life does not matter. Yes, we have faith and hope when someone dies, but we also have heartache and pain. There are no simple answers as to why grief and loss are a part of God's good creation. We long to understand how a loving God can allow suffering, yet, with all integrity, we cannot say we understand, it is a profound mystery beyond our knowing.

This does not however, leave us without the ability to respond to grief and loss with compassion and love. In the garden of gethsemane what Jesus wanted was his friends to

stay with him, to pray with him, to be with him. He did not expect them to understand his struggles, he simply wanted them to be there watching with him. But he was left alone to cry out to God. God alone was there.

That was not the way that it has to be. In suffering and loss, in grief and pain, it is possible for us to walk alongside one another. Some of us will find that easier than others. There can be a sense of fear in truly entering the grief of another. Will we get lost in darkness, will we still be able to hold some kind of light. What will we say. Most often, no words are really needed, our very presence says all that needs to be said and is presence is the light that is needed.

Some of us may find it a little too easy to dwell in the darkness that is when we risk ceasing to be the light. Our love for others will always want them to experience fullness of life.

There is a place for exploring our feelings; the Jewish tradition of Shiva, seven days of intense mourning, and the Māori Tangihanga, usually spread over three days, both give space for genuinely exploring the depth and complexity of our loss of a loved one. Some Māori also have the tikanga of someone living with the bereaved person to help them as they come to terms with their new life, moving from the initial grief into coping with the new circumstances of life.

Despite the Joy of the apostles, I am sure that they experienced a deep sense of loss. Losses come in all shapes and sizes. The apostles were confident that Jesus was the promised messiah. However, their vision of what that meant died with the death of Christ, crucified before their eyes.

With Christ's resurrection everything changed. It's not the normal kind of grieving but changes, even good ones, often cause a significant degree of disorientation. Jesus had been with them every day, now he appears occasionally and after forty days is gone. I wonder if Jesus dispatched them back to Jerusalem to give them the time and space they needed to adjust, to understand, to come to terms with the change.

Understanding and acknowledging our emotions is an essential part of grieving. You have probably heard of Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, you may have come across Worden's tasks of mourning, or Strobe and Shut's dual process model of coping with grief. These all deepen our understanding of loss and grief; they all fascinate me. They are all helpful in their own way. They allow us to explore what it means to grieve and what a normal pattern of grief might look like.

The findings of more recent studies of grief may surprise you. In studies of a wide range of people the dominant reaction to grief is one of resilience. The models were all born out of extreme situations and those needing additional support. For most people, even with the loss of a life partner, the dominant grief response is one of resilience; there is a relatively short period of time where our functioning in life is deeply affected and after that we cope, at least well enough.

This does not mean that life is not challenging or that people are ignoring the reality of death but rather that most people, with the right support can cope in a surprisingly resilient fashion. Grief does not routinely overwhelm us for an extended period.

The challenges most often come when grief is complicated through the circumstances of the death or even through multiple deaths or other significant losses in a short space of time. Though I am not going to argue with those who find strength in the claim that God does not give us more than we can cope with, it is not Biblical, it does not fit at all with the suffering of Job or the suffering of Christ, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me'.

It also doesn't fit with my experience of life. I have met many overwhelmed people in whose circumstances I would have been equally overwhelmed. So where does that leave us.

We have hope but that does not necessarily take away the pain of the present. I have often wondered why I feel at ease wandering alongside those who are in such darkness. I certainly don't fear the darkness, but neither do I seek it. The reason for wandering with those people is that I know that my presence can bring light and comfort and hope. Human connection is sometimes all that is needed and all that can be offered. And, though it feels like we are doing nothing, we may be doing everything.

Within this community we have experienced our share of losses and grief. This community has supported many of its members through their loss and grief. We don't always get it right but my hope is that this community will always strive to be a companion for all who seek support through their loss and grief.