

## **St. Marks – Tree of Light Service 2019**

Some years are tough. And nothing can protect you from hard things happening. You may recall the Queen referred to 1992 as her *annus horribilis* as a string of catastrophic events even affected the Royal Family. Perhaps you are here tonight feeling 2019 has been a truly awful year for you. Well tonight I want to share a little about perhaps the toughest year I had and how I found hope and the strength to move on. I pray my words bring you hope tonight.

I come from a close knit but small family in rural Worcestershire, and mercifully, though I turned 50 this year, I have suffered few family bereavements, yet in 2003 I lost 2 very close loved ones in very different circumstances. Firstly, my grandma Ellen who turned 100 in the March, died in the June after a slow and steady decline. Hers had been a life of hard work, first as a maid in a local stately home, then bringing up 2

children on her own during WW2 after her husband was belatedly called up for D day; then seeing out her days with Frank till he died, before spending her last 4 years in a lovely care home. Her death certificate said she died of old age - her body tired. Her death was sad but expected. However, as my grandma was dying, my Aunt Joyce who had been in the prime of health, a very active woman who had only just retired, started losing her appetite and becoming gaunt. After a series of tests, she was diagnosed as having cancer of the pancreas and with secondaries there was no course of treatment available. Her death, just 3½ months after my grandma's, truly cut me up. I was really close to Joyce and to say I was distraught doesn't come close. I wasn't at that stage a vicar and she never knew I was soon to leave teaching. How I'd loved to have shared with her my thoughts and faith. For a long period of time after Joyce's death, I couldn't mention her name without tears flowing and even years later even the slightest thing could spark a

memory and I'd be there in that empty pain again.

What made it worse was that her death so soon after my grandma's left me with a compounded grief.

And people offer such hollow words - time heals, once a year is over you'll be back to normal. The passage of time *does change things*, but not as people told me. The acute pain just slowly turned into the dull ache of loss.

But to those of you in that dark hard place tonight, I want to offer you words of hope; things I have discovered in my life and through my faith which have enabled me to embrace a "new normal" in my life. For although the Tree of Light service is a service of remembering, I pray you will also know you are not alone in your journey and there is someone who can help you in your place of need.

Our opening carol “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is a cry for the Lord to come and break into the darkness of the world. Verse 2 speaks of the Dayspring, that is Jesus, coming to disperse the gloomy clouds of night and putting death’s dark shadows to flight. This theme was then picked up in our first reading from Isaiah which started “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” In the time before Jesus came to earth, the Jewish people were oppressed and living therefore in gloom, so His arrival brought the very life and light of God into the situation - which is why symbolically I lit the candle at the start of the service. But these words speak not just to that point in history when Jesus was born, but to this time today too.

In the second reading from John’s Gospel we read that Jesus is “the true light that gives light to everyone.” That still holds true for everyone today who wants Jesus to help them. But I don’t think even though I had been a

Christian for over 10 years by 2003, I had ever really processed what this meant, till in my grief over the loss of my grandma and my Aunt Joyce, I cried out in my pain to God. It had felt at first that I was alone in my grief, but as I called out to God I found hope again. Let me explain.

Jesus was born in that stable in Bethlehem to a very ordinary Jewish family. Within weeks of his birth his family had to flee as refugees to Egypt to escape Herod's anger, and they only returned to live in Nazareth when that King had died. There Jesus was brought up, and Mary and Joseph had other children, so Jesus experienced all the fun of family life with his brothers and sisters. He learnt carpentry from Joseph and I'm sure suffered blisters, bruises and splinters like any other child would have done. And every family suffers hardship, challenge and sometimes grief. We can speculate as to some of the pain of human life he

experienced, but one thing we can say fairly definitely, is that from the accounts of Jesus ministry and crucifixion, we know Joseph his earthly father was dead by this stage. Jesus would have loved Joseph as any child loves a caring parent and his death would have made a huge impact on him. We can have little doubt about this because elsewhere in the Bible we read that Jesus wept when at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Of course in Middle Eastern culture, grief is more openly expressed than is often the case here in the UK, so Jesus while grief-stricken himself, must also have been there to comfort the distraught Mary after Joseph's death.

As I realised that Jesus himself not only understands the pain of bereavement and loss, but experienced it himself, it helped me see in Jesus a far more human Saviour. The Son of God has felt that acute pain of grief and the empty ache that follows. He knew the pain I felt, the sadness I had, the regrets I had. I could speak

to him in prayer, tell Him things and He would understand.

For Jesus is alive today. Though he died on the cross outside Jerusalem, within 2 days He was alive again; resurrected, and by His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, we can pray to Him, talk to Him today. So I shared my pain with Jesus and through His Holy Spirit I received comfort, love and peace; but something else too became real.

In the Isaiah passage we are told He reigns forever and in John's Gospel that Jesus enables us to become His children. I realised in a very new way that although my grandma and Aunt Joyce were no longer here with me they were with the Lord in heaven. His death and resurrection brought, as we shall sing shortly, "redeeming grace" whereby death is no longer the end. As a Christian I knew the teaching but as a man

struggling with loss I came to realise deep within that this *was true*. Indeed, in the story of Lazarus I referred to earlier, Jesus restores the dead man to life after telling Lazarus' sisters that he is “**the resurrection and the life.**” In other words, death does not have the final say - rather as my loved ones died here on earth they passed from this world to the heavenly glories with God.

Even after this all came real for me, I still had tough days, when the pain was bad, yet now I really knew that pain and loss was not the final word.

This Christmas time as you have come to remember loved ones, and I'm sure many of you are struggling, I want you all to know death is not the end. All are resurrected, and what's more Jesus understands the searing pain of loss and can help you in your grief. This night I pray that you will know the love of God

surrounding and upholding you, and that you will find in the retelling of the Christmas story renewed hope and peace. And may the love you have for those whom you miss this night find expression in the days ahead in sharing the wonder of the Christ-child whose birth brings the offer of salvation.

**Amen.**