

The End of Tears

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 5th Sunday of Easter, April 27, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Acts 14:8-18; Psalm 145:13b-21; *Revelation 21:1-6*; John 13:31-35.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Many Christians feel that the twenty-first chapter of Revelation is one of the most beautiful chapters in the Bible describing, as it does, Jerusalem the Golden. Some even feel that it's beauty surpasses any work of art, any scene in nature and any work of literature. This chapter has brought untold comfort and strength through the centuries to billions of the sad, the enslaved, the oppressed, and the persecuted by the promise it contains. Possibly the greatest verse in the chapter is this: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes".

Think of the rivers of tears that have flowed from the beginning of time till now. Think of the tears that Adam and Eve must have shed as they walked downcast from the Garden of Eden. Think of their tears when their one son was murdered by another. We're all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, Mr and Mrs Adamson. Think, more recently, of the tears-- the bitter, bitter tears-- that flowed from the eyes of the families of soldiers killed in Viet-Nam; the tears of the families of the babies that were killed in Rome and Libya. Think of the tens of thousands of hungry children in so many lands crying with hunger at this very moment, the tears of helpless invalids, of the abandoned wife, of the mother or father whose child has gone wrong-- tears of sorrow, tears of shame, tears of self-pity, tears of helplessness, tears of compassion.

The same God who takes notice of a sparrow when it falls to the ground and who numbers the hairs of our head is not unmindful of our tears. He doesn't despise our tears or tell us to keep a stiff upper lip and stop acting like cry-babies. Instead, he promises that one day he'll wipe them away

with his own hand. I believe that; because as a Christian I can't see God without seeing Christ, who couldn't see pain without stretching out his hand to help, who had compassion on the multitude, who himself shed tears at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

But why tears at all? If God's so loving and compassionate, why does he let his children suffer at all? When he created the world why couldn't he've made it in such a way that no tears would ever need to be shed? Why does he allow the things that happen in the world that cause tears? Watch the news on television, walk through the corridors of a nursing home or hospital, read the obituaries and divorce notices in the newspaper and the question rises up to hit you, "Why would God create a world that could become like this? Why not make a world where life was always pleasant?"

There are many areas in life so dark, fearful and bizarre that it's impossible for me to see why a god of love allows them-- malformed babies, cancer, senility. There've been many, many books written to explain the problem of evil but I believe we're just going to have to wait for a truly satisfying answer until we're told on the other side of death. In the meantime we can pray and work to try to find the way to avoid or alleviate some of these terrible conditions and stand by the weeping victims.

But would we really and truly want a life entirely without tears? If we were offered, on the one hand, life as it is with all of its perplexities and sorrows and pain and, on the other hand, a life in which we wouldn't feel anything, which would we choose? Given those two choices I'm pretty sure I'd choose life as it is. I remember my sister telling me about a funeral she attended years ago. It was a tragic situation. The parents had

lost a young boy. The father felt like a Christian shouldn't shed tears. He felt that would be a denial of his faith in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. So he went around smiling and laughing and entirely denying his grief and repressing his tears. Maybe, like a lot of men, he'd simply been taught from an early age that "big boys don't cry". It was really bizarre. His beloved young son was dead and here was this father going around laughing. I can't imagine tears being as terrible as that laughter in that situation.

Some of you high-school students may've had to read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It depicts a life without sorrow or pain. One of the citizens doesn't like it and says, "I don't want comfort. I want God. I want poetry. I want real danger. I want freedom." The Controller is aghast, can't understand this, and says, "But you'll be very unhappy." "Well", said the other, "I claim the right to be unhappy." Which would you choose? Many people are choosing for the *Brave New World*, a world where there's no real danger, no failure, no pain, no freedom. Drugs and medication can work wonders when taken under the close supervision of a doctor but sometimes we become more and more dependent upon drugs and alcohol to help us deal with the pain and tears in our lives. I remember a song by Simon and Garfunkel years ago when I was in college *I am a Rock, I am an Island*. The words I remember are these, "And a rock feels no pain and an island doesn't cry." But most of us pity someone who feels no pain and is unable to open up and cry and share the deep pain in life.

But if that's true, what do we do with the promise of our text? If God will one day wipe all tears from our eyes, if in Heaven there's no more pain or sorrow, will life there be as bland and shallow as a tearless life here would be? If God wipes away all tears, will he also be wiping away all

love and feeling from life?

Of course, as Christians we don't believe that. I do believe, though, that the eyes that have wept are never the same again. The heart that has suffered will be gentler for its suffering. Those whose tears have been dried are not the same as those who've never wept. About ten years ago I wept for the first time in my adult life. I can still remember those tears and the cleansing affect it had on me. I felt like a new person when those tears were finally wiped away. In a real sense my life hasn't been the same sense. I believe that people who've passed through the vale of tears emerge as better, kinder, braver people than they were before. J.M. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, was telling of the death of a child in his family. He said that the sorrow is what gave his mother her soft eyes and drew all sufferers to her gentleness. Sorrow has its meaning and purpose, as hidden as that meaning may be to us this side of the grave. God gave us tears to weep and when they've done their work with us, he wipes them all away, but we're never the same as a result.

I have no pat answer to the problems of evil and pain and sorrow. Any answer I could give would be unworthy of the dignity of tears and the agony of pain. I do believe, though, that there'll be an end of tears. The day will come when there'll be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain. But until then *we believe that God is in this life with us.* G.A. Studdert-Kennedy once wrote,

Are there no tears in the heart of the Eternal?
Is there no pain to pierce the soul of God?

...

Father, if He, the Christ, were Thy Revealer,
Truly the First Begotten of the Lord,
Then must Thou be a Suff'rer and a Healer,
Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword.

Then must it mean, not only that Thy sorrow
Smote Thee that once upon the lonely tree,

But that to-day, to-night, and on the morrow,
Still it will come, O Gallant God, to Thee.

Christian doctrine has always taught that Christ ascended into heaven and continues to be a real human being, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, sharing in our tears. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. I believe he continues to weep over Tripoli and Belfast and Beirut and San Salvador and Managua and Johannesburg. I believe he weeps over Oxford. And when we feel like crying he weeps over us and our homes and our loved ones. He sympathizes with us in our grief because he knows the feel of a broken heart. The hand that wipes our tears has nail-prints in it.

Amen

Let us pray:

Jesus, in mercy bring us
To that dear land of rest;
Who art, with God the Father, And Spirit, ever blest.
Amen.