



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 1: Letting tears bring a new beginning

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Psalm 126:5

“Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.”

The desire has been in my heart for some time to write and share a series of addresses here in the Wesley Theatre and on television which captures some of the personal challenges we may have to face in life. I hope these addresses are:

- Pastoral ... by way of focus and in offering gentle biblical guidance
- Practical ... in the way such guidance can be applied to our lives.

The title of the series is Does Anyone Actually Care? This puts the addresses into a framework designed by a culture that often leaves people isolated and scrambling for help. Though there are times when we feel no-one cares, we remind ourselves of God's care reaching out towards us in love and grace. There is no experience in life that is so hard as being unhelpfully alone. We need not remain alone.

I begin by talking about the effectiveness of tears and how they can (and often do) bring healing and a new beginning to people in the toughest situations.

I recall the little girl who had a terminal illness. She asked the nurse for a crying doll. The puzzled nurse said, “Why do you want a doll that can cry?” Her reply had the honesty and profound insight that children often exhibit: “Because Mummy and I both need to cry and Mummy won't cry in front of me and I can't cry if Mummy doesn't. If we had a crying doll, all three of us could cry together. I know we would both feel better then!”

That story provides a useful starting point to this whole series. Tears—or some untapped emotion—can release our lives and allow God's love to speak to us at our point of need. There are tears which are performance tears; we often use the term ‘crocodile tears’ ... and there are certainly ‘tears of bitterness’. The genuine tears I speak of this evening are those that we are able to let go and make way for a new beginning.

Another introductory point would be to emphasise that tears are not just for women either! In Lament for a Son, Nicholas Woltersturf related how he found himself crying after his son had died in a climbing accident. He reflected:

“Our culture says men must be strong and that the strength of a man in sorrow is to be seen in his tearless face. Tears are for women. Tears are signs of weakness and women are permitted to be weak. But must we always mask our suffering? I mean, may we not sometimes allow people to see and enter it? May men not do this?”

There are possibly two ways of understanding this psalm: one may be in an historical context; and the other may be a worship context.

Psalm 126 speaks from the perspective of one who is living at a very unhappy time in his people's history. He was mindful of all the high promise which was experienced by a people rebuilding physically and communally after the devastation inflicted by the Babylonians. What might have been a time filled with hope is now only a distant memory. Israel had become as barren of life and hope as that which could be seen by observing the beds of the empty rivers.

Text: Psalm 126:5

“Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.”

So if this psalm has a particular historical context, there is no doubt it has a worship context ... it would be used at some special festival or the like, when there is a celebration of a great restoration of political or national fortunes.

This text can also describe how our lives can feel when we discover the power of tears which make way for healing. The concept of lament is a very helpful insight ... and this psalm has been classed by some as a national lament.

In the Old Testament, there are many contexts of lament:

- To mourn or to cry aloud
- To weep or to wail
- To chant a mournful song.

To lament actually has a much richer meaning, for it is that heartbreaking which gives way to hope. The experience is one in which we are caught in a typhoon of sorrows but, even within the storm, see the possibility of a new beginning.

Some have identified this psalm as one of the most beautiful in the whole Psalter. The beauty, I would suggest, lies not so much in the style of literature or the form of its poetic reach, but in the fullness of heart with which it speaks.

J E McFadyen said the psalm passes swiftly through the changes of life:

- laughter and tears
- sorrow and joy
- dejection and exaltation
- exile and redemption
- spring and autumn
- dream and reality

The sorrow of it all is swallowed up in the splendid vision with which the psalm concludes, where the psalmist speaks of sowing in tears and reaping in joy.

This particular picture can be helpfully contextualised in its geographical environment. South of Jerusalem was the thirsty ground known as the Negev. In the summer, the land appeared barren under what was a pitiless heat. The former streams were dry and beasts would be thirsty—but autumn brought rain which refreshed the earth and filled the waddies.

The psalmist is touching the deep places of our lives. He treats tears as normal—not a particularly special response. As we have identified, there are different kinds of tears ... tears of regret, of hurt and of sympathy with another—but here we are referring to tears of sorrow.

We readily identify sorrow with personal loss, but it has a wider scope than bereavement. There is also loss of identity, position and abilities. All of these seem to be caught up in this particular picture. With that in mind, I want to talk about tears which lead to release and the opportunity of healing in the most positive of ways.

Clarence Edward Macartney refers to the Manx poet, T E Brown, who writes of “a lighthouse off the Calf of Man. From the shore of the Calf, a long slope runs off to the crest of the island. Near the top of the slope are the cottages inhabited by the families of the lighthouse keepers, their doors opening directly towards the lighthouse, which is separated from the mainland by a stretch of stormy sea. For months at a time the keepers cannot visit their families, but on a clear Sabbath, when the sun shines brightly, they solace themselves by looking through a powerful telescope at their wives and children gathered in front of the cottage doors.”

So our tears can clear the way for hope.

Tears are not a sign of weakness, but of strength

We are prone to see tears as either negative or weak—and leave little room to recognise their positive qualities ... and even strength. Tears can testify to love—and love calls for courage, which always risks being hurt. Every loss that brings tears is an opportunity to find a new depth of life. Growth is nearly always frightening, because it is uncharted territory. Tears that spring in this way can bring healing and a new beginning.

We return to the fields of the psalmist, who knew what it was to sow in barren times. The picture is conjured up by the phrase that refers to the sower who carries his seed sack and, as he sows, he utters a great wail which, according to popular belief, made the seed productive.

To some extent, the life of Israel has been very closely tied to the story of tears. Think of the Passover where salt water represents tears. Although the vision was always of a great time of harvesting, how often she has had to suffer tears as a nation ... and these words would have been a great inspiration.

At times, our tears can be an embarrassment to others. We will return to that in a moment or two. However, they do show strength of feeling.

Whenever anyone has gone through an experience of loss, of course one of the things we ought to do is help them to cry ... for in the very crying there is release ... and the strength comes in the fact that there has been a recognition on our part of our need and of our hurt.

We become a vulnerable people and strength of character can be related to vulnerability. There are some people who spend their whole time covering up their tracks; they would rather be about other people's vulnerability than their own ... whereas strength is often discovered in the person who does not cover up, but says, “Here it is—it hurts, but it is real!”

How do we relate this to the Gospel of Jesus? This is not only an interesting question, but a fundamentally gospel question for all of us.

We need go no further than Jesus' Parable of the Sower to learn that, in life, much seed will be wasted. There is, however, that which brings forth a plentiful harvest. Surely the teaching

of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in the Beatitudes, is so consistent with that which we find here:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted
because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:10)

Little John had eyes full of tears and said to his Mum, who was peeling onions, “those onions are strong Mum; I can smell them with my eyes.”

Strong people smell with their eyes and their hearts.

Tears can be a way of alerting us to problems to be dealt with

Sometimes we cry because we're angry, afraid, guilty, helpless, worn out or generally depressed. It is normal to cry when we have lost, but excessive tears after much time, without bringing relief of any kind, may be alerting us to other problems.

At whom am I angry?—and why? Do I need to forgive? Are my guilt feelings normal ones of regret or more serious? Not eating properly, getting sufficient rest or exercise and not being with other people may be accentuating my normal feelings of depression.

To care for ourselves, we need to be willing to identify the deeply-hidden needs of the human heart. Jesus can meet us there and is able to work in the inner parts of our lives. Our tears may open up the way for God's presence.

In *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, James J Lynch says that people can actually die of a broken heart. Tears can at least remove those things which build up during emotional stress.

The general point to be made here is that tears point us in a certain direction and they are an indicator of something more. We need to choose those people who will not wipe the tears and ask no questions, but those who through trust and genuine faith prove that their standing with us enables us to deal with the deep parts of our lives. It could be that things left 'un-dealt-with' here produce bitterness ... and indeed cruel spirits ... whereas tears which move us on to wholeness produce an ability to care and love, which is so often unknown in the tearless person.

At the southernmost point of South Africa is a cape, around which storms are always raging. For a thousand years no-one knew what lay beyond the cape, for no ship had ever returned to tell the tale. It was called the Cape of Storms. In the 16th century, the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, successfully navigated his way around the cape and found beyond it a great calm sea ... and beyond that the shores of India. So the name was changed to the Cape of Good Hope.

Tears need self-control in appropriate settings

We can cause unnecessary distress for others. A mother once realised that not crying in front of her children might give the impression to them that she did not care for her husband who had just died. However, she was aware that excessive crying would frighten them, so she said, “I told them they would see me crying, but they shouldn't worry. I explained that I needed to cry and after a while I would feel happy again.”

R Scott Sullender wrote *Grief and Growth* and described our tears as 'inner storehouses'. Control may mean being willing to look to cry. Purposeful grieving, smelling familiar smells, playing the old songs and visiting the cemetery may be necessary. You see, if Sullender is right, then when the storehouse gets full, it may overflow because of something inconsequential. Controlling our tears may mean recalling and journeying down the roads of real pain.

If we are to be whole people, acknowledging that there has to be a place for tears is vital ... and finding the right context for tears is equally important. For some, it is in the privacy of a room; for others it is in the company of friends whose love and understanding is an expression of care; for some it comes at those deeply spiritual moments—perhaps as we take bread and wine and as we celebrate the vulnerability of God in Christ, who for our sin loved us to the end in which he is willing to die upon the cross.

I always feel that Holy Communion is one such appropriate place—and if tears have to flow, then let them flow. That is why I would encourage people to read the scriptures or sing hymns devotionally during communion. Hymns themselves can become a great release ... and that is another reason why I think it is important that emotion is found within our hymns and worship.

If I had to list places where tears can be expressed in a way that is controlled, I would say that ...

- tears can be shed as a sign of love with people for whom we care
- tears could be shed, thus revealing our hurt, in the context of love ... and never as a weapon
- tears can be the beginning and the end of healing.

Tears can wash clean the lens through which you look at life

This is one of those positive Christian truths we find in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we look at the world through tears, it is possible to value what we take for granted. We can even move nearer to God through experiences which otherwise might be viewed as negative.

Let us then conclude by being very positive this evening and affirm together the healing properties of tears, which can bring wholeness and peace to our lives.

Psalm 30:5 tells us that "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." I think this helps to express a truth which will support and comfort us in every experience of life.

There is always hope because of Christ and, therefore, there is never an end and always a beginning. In one of the early publications of *The Life of Jesus*, available at the beginning of the last century, it ends with the cross. There is an admission on the part of the writer of strange rumours abroad, but insists that "for the historian, the life of Jesus finishes with His last sigh."

If this were the case, then the writer has ignored the expansion and continuance of the Christian cause ... and the New Testament loses its meaning for the world, for the unifying factor of the new Testament is the belief that Christ has been raised from the dead and the tears in the Garden of one who did not recognise the Christ become new windows through which to look out on the world when the woman hears her name ... "Mary". Her simple response is "Master"—and out of the tears comes healing.

Sorrow and hurt can produce very negative reactions within us—namely rebellion, bitterness, withdrawal, caressing or fondling one's sorrow, blaming God and withdrawing from an active Christian life.

On the other hand, it is possible to:

- accept it
- learn to live with it
- handle it constructively
- carry on with responsibilities in life
- receive the presence of this tearful Christ and the hope of tearless Eternity.