

Turning Tears of Pain to Tears of Joy Genesis 49:28-33, John 11:32-44

Last Friday was Halloween. Halloween is primarily a celebration day for children. Do you know when would be the first Halloween in the Bible? I would say that it is the day when Lazarus came out from the tomb. If the Lord was not there when Lazarus emerged, all of Mary and Martha's visitors would have believed he was a ghost, and run away.

When my family came to the United States in 1979 there were many cultural differences we had to get used to. One of them was Halloween. That first Halloween, I didn't know what to do when children came to our home dressed as ghosts, skeletons, corpses, or little Draculas. At that time I didn't understand why people wanted to scare and frighten people like me on that day. But pretty soon, my own kids were enjoying going out "trick or treating" on Halloween night.

The term Halloween is shortened from All Hallows' Eve, or the night before All Hallows' Day (now known as All Saints' Day). As we know from the Lord's Prayer, hallow means holy, as in "hallowed be thy name."

Halloween was originally a celebration day in the European pagan traditions, until Popes Gregory III and Gregory IV moved the Christian feast of All Saints' Day from May 13 to November 1. So Halloween is a pagan festival, while All Saints' Day is a reformed Christian holiday.

Today is All Saints Sunday. We celebrate this day to remember all those who have passed away from our local congregation. A candle is lit by the family of friends as each person's name is called out. Then a liturgical prayer is offered for each soul in Heaven.

Early Christians remembered the anniversary of a martyr's death for Christ (known as the "saint's birth day") with an all night vigil, and then celebrated the Eucharist over their tomb or the site of the martyr's death. In the fourth century, neighboring dioceses began to celebrate the feast days of specific martyrs in common. Frequently a number of Christians suffered martyrdom on the same day, which led to joint commemorations. During the rule of the Roman emperor Diocletian, so many Christians were martyred that it became impossible to assign separate days, and the Church appointed a single day for all martyrs.

Today's scripture reading is about Lazarus, who is raised up from the dead. In this story, tears of pain are transformed to tears of joy. The story goes like this:

Jesus was traveling with his disciples in a distant province, when he received a message from Bethany, which is near Jerusalem. The message was from Mary and Martha, saying "Lord, the one you love, Lazarus, is sick." Lazarus, as you know, was Mary and Martha's brother. When Jesus heard this message, He said "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified

through it." Jesus loved Martha, her sister Mary, and her brother Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was for two more days.

After finishing his work -- teaching, preaching, and healing -- Jesus finally went to Bethany where Lazarus was. When we arrived, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Evidently, it was too late to heal Lazarus' sickness.

When Mary received the visitor she had been waiting for -- Jesus -- she was regretful of his late arrival. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," said Mary with a tearful voice. When Jesus saw her, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. Jesus asked her, "Where have you laid Lazarus?" The response came, "Lord, come and see." And on the way to the grave, Jesus wept.

Along the road where Jesus walked Jews followed him. When the company arrived at the grave, they saw it was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. It was a typical Palestinian tomb, which had no door, but was sealed with a great stone that rolled along a groove in front of the cave.

When Jesus saw the tomb He said, "Take away the stone." Then Martha responded, "Lord, by this time he stinks; for he has been dead four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Those who believe the promise of the Lord do not fear death or tears of pain in this world. They hope for tears of joy, and look to the triumph of the eternal world. The early Christians believed in this eternal comfort, and in life they did not fear persecution.

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the early Christian church, wrote to the church at Rome shortly before he was executed: "Grant me no more than to be a sacrifice for God while there is an altar at hand... I would rather die and get to Jesus Christ, then reign over the ends of the earth."

Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna in the second century, was tied to the stake to be burned because he would not curse Christ and bow down to Caesar. Polycarp said, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King? I am a Christian." Then he said a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the privilege of dying for the faith.

The Apostle Paul, as he faced death, spoke to his Philippian friends with a heart overflowing with joy: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil 4:4, 1:21)

There is an old tale in the Buddhist tradition. A man is attacked by wild beasts and runs to hide in a dry well. But after he gets into the well, he sees at the bottom a fierce dragon. The wild beasts are above and the dragon is below and he is caught in between. So he catches a branch of a bush growing out of the wall. Then, to his horror, he sees two mice nibbling at the root of the bush. He knows the branch will soon break off and he will fall into the jaws of the dragon. Then looking around, he sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush. So he stretches out his tongue and licks the honey - and for a moment, he completely forgets his precarious situation.

This tale suggests that we too are perched precariously over death - our own death and the death of our loved ones - and, like the man in the story, we choose to ignore it. We refuse to face the hard fact of death; we go through life sipping honey - until suddenly someone we love lies. What do we do then? Most people don't know what to do. Most people don't really know how to handle the death of a loved one.

If we don't have the truth of eternity, how pitiful and miserable we are. Life, when we finish its course, is not a period, but a comma. Our life in Christ will be continued in the world to come. This is the time, on All Saints' Day, that we reaffirm our faith and commemorate those who finished their life in faith. They will taste tears of joy, from their tears of pain.

Mary and Martha cried twice in front of Jesus. At first, they cried because they lost their loved one. At that time the tears was of pain, suffering and regret. But later they cried again because they were extremely happy when their beloved one, Lazarus was came out from the tomb, awaken. At this time the tears was of joy, extremely happy. I imagine that they ran into Jesus and hugged him and cried.

Like Mary, who lost her brother Lazarus, Jesus will cleanse our tears of pain and give us tears of joy. Jesus told us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." And He promised that He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"

I lost my sister who lived in Korea on May this year. She loved me a lot and cared me a lot. Last year she came to United State, dragging her pity body to see her brothers and sister. At that time se told us that this visit will be her last visit and encounter. She already knew that her life was approaching to death. Finally she was passed away several months after her visiting us. And I couldn't go to her funeral because of long distance. I prayed for her soul and her family.
But I believe that she will cry with tear of joy when she meets Jesus in heaven.

We celebrate today to remember all those who have passed away from our church families. We lit a candle, rang a bell, and offered a prayer for each soul in heaven. Now let's praise the Lord who gives us tear of joy and triumph through those who have passed away. May the grace and comfort of the Lord be with you who offered Saints' names today.

