

Tears

Readings: Psalm 126, Luke 7:36 - 50

When I was praying about becoming an ordained minister, I asked our eldest daughter what she thought. Rachael is a nurse, and a very matter of fact person. Her response? "Oh Mum, you'll never be able to take a funeral without crying!"

It's funny. Going a little deeper though; it assumes that crying is a bad thing. In our daughter's eyes, if I crying at funerals meant I wouldn't be able to be an effective minister.

What do you think about that? Is crying a bad thing?

Or are tears an important part of being human? Might they be part of something far deeper that God is doing in and through us? I can recall praying for a widow who on finding herself unable to cry deeply longed for the gift of tears.

Psalm 126 is a song of contrasts; weeping and laughter. The people of Zion laughed aloud when the Lord restored them. Their rejoicing was ecstatic.

Their joy was heightened because they'd known great grief. They had been exiled. Verses 1 – 3 probably refer to the restoration to their own land while verses 4 – 6 describe a much later crop failure, perhaps because of drought or pestilence. (Jer 14, Isaiah 56 – 66, Joel 2:21 – 3:1).

The psalm was likely used in community worship: possibly at New Year (Succot) when people prayed for the restoration of Israel. The powerful honesty of emotion comes through as they remember the tough times of the past. The dreams in verse 1 are not fantasy. The sense is more like having to pinch oneself after waking from a dream that has become reality. It is so good; it's hard to believe it is true.

God's actions were so amazing that other nations were all talking about them. Joy and singing erupted. Probably many tears of joy were shed.

When did you last cry tears of happiness? Perhaps you laughed so much you cried? Tears of joy and laughter are wonderful aren't they? Lord, more of those please.

Psalm 126 reminds us that in tough times we need to remember that God has intervened in our lives before. God always brings something good out of the worst circumstance. It won't necessarily be turned to what we want but we will grow as the Lord companion us and lead us closer to Jesus.

We are never alone. God is with us when we weep tears of joy or tears of sorrow.

Another psalmist, even in his worst moments, knows that God is very conscious of the tears we shed. In Psalm 56:8 he writes that the Lord keeps the tears in a bottle. In other versions of the same verse he asks the Lord to record the number of those tears on a scroll.

Whichever version you go with, there is the sense of God being so close, so involved, that every single tear has been noted.

Did you know that the chemical make-up of tears varies depending on the reason we cry? Tears are mostly water, salts, antibodies and lysozymes (antibacterial enzymes). A biochemist, Dr Frey, found that the composition of tears caused by emotion is different to that of tears as a reaction to irritations like onions or allergies. Emotional tears contain more protein-based hormones, some of which are a natural pain killer. Maybe this is why crying can make us feel better? Perhaps there is a physical reason why crying is part of our healing process.¹

Let's consider the story of the un-named woman in Luke.

The events happen at a meal hosted by Simon who is a Pharisee. Simon appeared to be hospitable; but was he? Or was that hospitality was an outward thing; a thing of duty? Jesus wasn't greeted nor was his head anointed with oil. These things were politeness 101. No-one in that place or time culture would neglect these simple courtesies. Maybe he was prepared to welcome someone of importance, like a prophet, but certainly not an immoral woman.

Culturally Simon was within his rights to be unhappy about the woman's presence. Whether or not she was a prostitute, she would have been ritually unclean. Her behaviour is outrageous – she has intruded; she has embarrassed herself and everyone else – except, apparently, Jesus!

This woman was beyond caring what people thought – she'd been used and abused and it was time for all of this to stop.

Time to take action! Upon Jesus was eating at Simon's house, she went out and spent a fortune on perfumed ointment in order to anoint Jesus.

Imagine the scene, Jesus and others would be sitting or reclining at a low, U-shaped table. This woman, who knows she is socially unacceptable, knows she is despised and knows she has lived an unhealthy, sinful life, wants somehow to make amends, to be different. And somehow she knows only Jesus can remake her. So this woman comes in and kneels behind Jesus. On seeing him she begins to weep, and she weeps so much that her tears drip on Jesus' feet. She unbinds her hair and wipes his feet with her hair.

At this point you can hear the sharp intakes of breath. What is she doing this harlot? Untying her hair, caressing Jesus feet, pouring ointment on them and kissing them; these things were seductive acts in the eyes of all those gathered – slutty acts!

Showing your hair in public then was like going topless might be today (and not on beaches where that is acceptable). I'll let you come to your own conclusions about what the equivalent of actually wiping Jesus' feet with her hair might be today. At the very least her actions were open to misinterpretation.

¹ Am J Ophthalmol. 1981 Oct;92(4):559-67

But Jesus didn't misinterpret her actions. Jesus knew her tears signified sorrow for her sin and a deep sense of unworthiness and guilt. Jesus knew she was deeply penitent about the past and he knew she wanted to change.

On recognising all of that Jesus holds her up before the religious lot as an example of great kindness and love. Can you imagine how she felt when Jesus asks Simon with more than a hint of irony in his voice; "Have you seen this woman.?" As if they hadn't spent the whole time trying to avoid looking at her.

As all eyes turn her way, initially she probably wants to be invisible. But Jesus compares her favourably with Simon. You didn't greet me or anoint me. This woman has done both. She has cared for me in a way that you should have. She is greater than you."

I can hear echoes of Jesus words in Luke "Whoever is the least among you shall be the greatest." (Lk 9:48)

Simon appears to be welcoming to anyone. In fact he is not. The comparison between his outward righteousness and the humble repentance of the woman could not be more stark.

Simon wants honour in front of his peers by hosting a 'prophet' at the meal. The woman truly wanted to honour Jesus by serving him now and following him forever. Her tears and her actions indicated just how deeply she wanted to change. She longed for forgiveness and freedom in following Jesus. This longing was so deep it threatened to overwhelm her.

Her tears were the outward sign of repentance or turning around. She was giving up her old way of life; she was surrendering her very self as she had always been. Her tears brought healing in more ways than she could have imagined. In surrender Jesus brought her salvation. In her death to self, she found who the Lord had created her to be. In her tears she submitted any power or illusion of it, to God. She became a fully-fledged Christ follower.

Tears are central to emptying oneself of one's glory; "they are a sign that we are struggling with power of one sort or another; the loss of ours; the entering of God's." writes Maggie Ross.²

We said before that God knows the number of our tears. God won't be manipulated by them. Human parents usually know when their kids are faking it; God certainly does.³

Genuine tears are an outward expression that something profound is happening inwardly. Fake tears seldom achieve anything. Genuine tears release the power of

² Maggie Ross, *Pillars of Flame, Power, Priesthood and Spiritual Maturity*, 124 quoted by John Goldingay in *Walk On* 158

³ The prophet Malachi tells the people off their sin, saying it doesn't matter how much they cry; if they don't repent, the Lord won't take any notice of their tears. (Mal 2:13). Even though Esau cries and begs for the blessing he gave to Jacob God refuses to listen. (Heb 12:17)

God within us. Jesus recognised the woman for who she was becoming. He held her up as an example. He loved her with his words and his power. He forgave her, set her free on the path to a new life. And he sent her out with peace.

John Goldingay, an Old Testament professor and author, tells how he always cried near the end of one of his own sermons. The sermon was Samson. What brought John to tears was the fact that Samson, who fell so short of what he could have been, is recorded as an example of faith in Hebrews chapter 11. (Heb 11:32) If there is room for Samson, writes John, there is clearly room for each one of us.⁴

It is moving, that no matter how much we stuff up, there is always room for us too. Verse 34 of that faith chapter says that ‘There weakness was turned to strength.’

So it can be with our tears.

Tears serve a very good purpose. They can wash out something that is irritating our eyes. They relieve the intensity of our emotions. They show others we care about them and build empathy.

Most of all they release the power of God within us. The Lord knows when we cry and longs to be known by us in our tears as well as our laughter. The Holy Spirit will bring about God’s healing through Jesus’ Christ when we cry whether those tears are of joy, of repentance, of sorrow, of love, of longing

Restore us Lord,
as streams renew the desert.
May those who plant in tears
harvest with shouts of joy.
May those who weep as they go to plant their seed,
sing as they return with the harvest.

⁴ John Goldingay, Walk On 155 - 156