**Audio service, 28 November 2021**

**Prayer**

Come, Jesus Christ,

to restore all that has been lost

through struggle and fear,

in sorrow and in pain.

Come, Prince of Peace,

to restore the balance of hope

for those oppressed and hungry of justice,

overlooked and counted of little worth.

Come, Son of God,

to restore to wholeness

the image that is tarnished

with sin and shame,

neglect and distraction.

Come, Great Redeemer,

in poverty and humility

to raise us all to eternal glory.

Amen

**Reading**

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Sermon**

November, grey, cold November, is the month when many churches across the world hold special celebrations to remember our dead. In Britain, Remembrance Sunday falls on the second Sunday of the month, and it is primarily to remember the servicemen and women, military and civilian, who have lost their lives in the world wars. The Protestant Churches in Germany and Switzerland mark ‘Ewigkeitssonntag’, or Eternity Sunday, on the last Sunday before the First of Advent, which is today. Only one week separates Eternity Sunday from the First of Advent. Within a week we move from remembering what we have lost, to preparing for the arrival of a new-born baby. “The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of lights”, the Bible says.

If only it was that easy!

Grief is a messy, multifaceted, and unpredictable journey, and not a straightforward process from darkness to light. Grief is not a tunnel with an entrance and an exit that once crossed is a thing of the past. Rather, I’d like to imagine grief is a mountainy landscape with dark tunnels and sunny peaks, shady valleys next to green rolling hills, places of shelter and sudden storms. Loss and grief change us invariably and forever. The way we live with grief is individual. Some people die of a broken heart, some will struggle to feel the lightness of life again; others will find new strength and move on, making new plans, or even feel relieved.

Grief and mourning are often associated with the death of a loved person, or a pet. But mourning affects many other areas of our lives too. We mourn when a relationship breaks down. We mourn our health in the face of a life-changing or life-threatening illness. We mourn the places of our childhood, especially as migrants who have moved country. We mourn peace in times of war, freedom in times of imprisonment. We mourn our dreams or plans that we can no longer pursue.

During the 1950ies, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss physician from Zurich working in the United States, made it her life’s work to educate people about the process of dying and grieving. She identified ‘the five stages of mourning’: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. For a long time, grief was seen as a linear process. Once we have absolved the five stations, we come out the other end and can carry on with our lives. But today, we look at the stages of mourning and grief differently. Rather than it being a linear process, they come and go in waves. Swiss psychologist Verena Kast speaks of four waves that are based on Kübler-Ross’ theory of the five stages: the first wave being ‘Non-acceptance’, the second wave being ‘Emerging Emotions’ (including anger, pain and guilt), the third wave being ‘Searching and Letting Go’ (including finding places of commemoration and reminiscing), the finally the forth wave being ‘New Connection with the Self and with the World’ (when we accept life as it is and start making new plans). Often, these waves come and go throughout life, some of them raw and predominant over others.

Is life ever without mourning? Or are we not much rather constantly saying goodbye, always moving, seasons changing, leaving behind dreams, people, and places. Sometimes the waves of grief are faint, gently rushing in the distance, almost peaceful, a sense of nostalgia, past times, cherished memories; even filling our hearts with gratefulness for what we have now and what has been. Sometimes however, the waves of grief are like a gigantic tsunami pulling away the ground under our feet, throwing us around, exhausting, suffocating, life-threatening.

And then comes Advent, the time of light in the dark winter season. The Advent light leads us to the birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace, the Son of God. That sounds so glorious, so joyful, so completely wonderful! Depending on the wave of grief we find ourselves in, the Advent light can seem foreign, as it had nothing to do with us. Depending on the wave of grief we find ourselves in, we may find it difficult to rejoice in the light. Perhaps in this moment it helps to remember that the Advent light does not lead us to a palace, nor to a king in golden robes or a richly laid table. The Advent light leads us to a stable, to the birth of a baby, a birth which like every birth is messy, life and death close together, tears of joy and pain and frustration flowing all at once. The Advent light leads us to a couple on a journey, strangers in a foreign land, depending on other people’s help. The Advent light leads us to a manger laid out with itchy straw, rather than a comfortable bed with soft linen. The Advent light leads us to the perfect mess of the birth of Jesus Christ, a mess perhaps that we see reflected in our own lives.

If we look at our lives as a process of mourning that comes in waves, sometimes faintly rushing in the distance, sometimes breaking over us like a tsunami, then the same can be said for joy. Joy comes and goes in waves, sometimes breaking into our lives like a tsunami, sometimes but a faint hope in the distance. The waves of grief and joy are all around us. The moment joy breaks into our lives, grief disappears, and vice versa; and other times, joy and grief are equal companions.

Let this Advent be a reminder that however high or low the tide our grief, joy also comes and goes in waves, and that we can lay all our hope in Jesus Christ to restore the balance and make us whole again, at peace with our loss and welcoming in the flame of joy, never static, but dynamic and unpredictable as the ocean’s waves.

Amen

**Blessing**

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you,

scatter the darkness from before your path,

make you whole, in spirit, soul and body,

and keep you safe.

God bless you and keep you; God make her face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; God lift her countenance upon you and give you peace.

Que le Seigneur te bénisse et te garde! Que le Seigneur fasse briller sur toi son visage, qu’il se penche vers toi! Que le Seigneur tourne vers toi son visage, qu’il t’apporte la paix!

Gott segne dich und behüte dich; Gott lasse das Angesicht leuchten über dir und sei dir gnädig; Gott hebe sein Angesicht über dich und gebe dir Frieden.

Amen

Gönd in Friede, und bringet de Fride i d’Wält. Go in peace, and bring peace to the world.