

Returning gently

*Sermon on a Sunday when we light candles in memory of those we miss,
and one of the first Sundays of having face-to-face worship*

7 November 2021

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

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Read: John 11:32-44; Revelation 21: 1-6a; Romans 12: 9-15

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Show us your ways, Lord, teach us your paths. Guide us in your truth and teach us, for you are God our Savior, and our hope is in you all day long. Amen.

For many, there is much to rejoice about now, as we start to gather a bit more after being separated for so long during the lockdowns. It is good and right to rejoice in some of the new meet-ups we've been able to have and seeing people we haven't otherwise seen face-to-face for a long time. There is much to be thankful for.

But we're in a complicated space, all together, and there is much weeping too.

Not everyone has yet been able to see those they miss face-to-face, and for some that is still a very long time away. Some people have really struggled through the isolation, and still feel the negative effects of it. Some of us are vulnerable, and appropriately nervous about keeping safe. Some of us have family members or friends who are vulnerable - some despite vaccination, a few unable to be vaccinated. Some of us have family members or friends whose opposition to vaccinations is based in conspiracy theories and fear in ways that make conversation and socialisation really hard. Really hard.

Some of those protesting against vaccination mandates yesterday are very genuinely, if mistakenly, afraid, and more realistically afraid that they may end up cut off from society for what could be a very long time. We have to be careful here – with sufficiently high vaccination rates we're going to need to find ways for safe integration of everyone in public spaces, and in the meantime look for ways to ensure that those who are vulnerable and unvaccinated don't fall outside of our care.

My point, though, is that we are still in a time when many of us are bearing grief, sometimes known by others, sometimes not. This is an important time to be gentle with one another, and to look out for one another.

It's like what I wrote in the latest High Street Times about Jeremiah's words about the exiles' eventual return to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 31:7-9): that there would be rejoicing, but also weeping for all that has been hard along the way and that still is.

Today we are spending some intentional time remembering especially those we love who have died. Even in that there may be a mixture of rejoicing and weeping – some rejoicing and thankfulness for the life known and shared; along with weeping, maybe for them, maybe for us.

At the very centre of John's gospel - or at least, in what I think is the central story and the turning point of the narrative - Jesus weeps. One of the first things he did in John's gospel was to join the rejoicing at a wedding party; here in the centre of the gospel he weeps, at the death of one he loves. We don't know a lot about Lazarus – all we need to know, really, is that Lazarus is loved by God. But he has died. Mary weeps; Jesus weeps.

We're not always good at slowing down to stop, to mourn together. During lockdowns it's been particularly hard. But we are encouraged not just to rejoice with one another, but also to weep with one another.

The gospel points ahead to further good news. God is the God of all, in this life and the life to come; and there are various pictures in the Bible about God's hope for all the world when what is perishable puts on imperishability; and heaven and earth are made new. If the beginning of John's gospel has Jesus rejoicing, and the middle of John's gospel has Jesus weeping, then the end of John's gospel has Jesus, crucified and risen, inviting us to trust God on the basis of all that he's demonstrated and done.

But in many ways the weeping at the centre of the gospel is just as much good news to us; because we are not alone when we weep – God is with us.

So today I'm not going to say too much more. Today we have a chance to reflect on the people we love and care for, around us, to remember those we miss, and to remember particularly those we love who have died; and to share together in those emotions and prayers in this time we have set aside with God and each other today in the church or in our homes.

We will share a song, and then I'll lead us into a lighting of tapers and candles.