

Sermon Archive 579

Thursday 2 April, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: John 11: 28-37

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The service is called "The Night of Tears - an evening service on Maundy Thursday"

Gavin Smillie was from the Waikaka Valley, just outside of Gore, and was thirteen years old when diagnosed with leukaemia. I visited him in hospital from diagnosis in April until late October, when he died. His parents asked me if I would speak at his funeral; so I travelled down South, arriving the day before at the house of the local minister, Max Garrity. Max gave me a bed for the night, and time to work on my speech in his study, which was a porta-com in the back garden. I remember sitting at the desk, looking out the ranch slider window at green pasture with fluffy white sheep. "The Lord's my shepherd", I thought. The next day, at the big church in Gore, the funeral went well. Gavin's parents told me so, and thanked me for being there. They told me that they would never forget.

That night, back in Dunedin, in the shower, I just cried. My tears joined the river of soap and suds going down the plughole.

A few days later, a staff member at the boarding house asked me how I was. I said I was fine, but related the story of crying in the shower. Witness to this was a fourth former, fourteen, going on fifteen, Angus Russell from Karitane. I remember the

look on his face. He looked embarrassed - embarrassed for me that either I had cried, or that I had admitted to it. Men don't cry. It's something we might believe when we are fourteen, going on fifteen. Then life happens. I still remember the look on his face.

-ooOoo-

Over ten years later, I am conducting the funeral service of Desma Riddle, who'd been a missionary nurse in India, where she had met the recently widowed missionary minister, Doug Riddle. Their happy retirement was spent on Auckland's North Shore, where I became their minister. Desma had drive; Doug had a gentle voice, a gentle way. One of the ways they served God in Takapuna was to do a weekly stint in the St George's manse garden - since the minister at the time was legendary for not having a clue in the garden. They would roll up, once a week in their campervan, with their rescue dog Charlie, and quietly do my gardening. We would share a cup of tea sometimes, and solve all the world's problem. As ever, in these conversations, Desma had drive, and Doug had a gentle voice.

So, I have taken her funeral, and it's all gone well. I get to the part where I say "Desma, go forth from this world in the love of God the Father who created you" - but I cannot say it. Tears.

Afterwards, Doug is very good about it. He tells me that **his** expression for what **he** also has experienced while taking funerals is "having a puncture". I'd had a puncture. He was working hard to make me feel OK. When you're fourteen going on fifteen, you're embarrassed. When you're 41, you apologise. When you're 82, you forgive your minister - because you know that life happens, death happens; the

seeds falls into the ground - we cry, but sometimes something grows.

-ooOoo-

When Lazarus died, Jesus wept. Some people saw it as a sign of deep love - tears for a fallen friend. Others used it as an opportunity to say that he was out of his depth. "Could he not have **done** something to save him?" Stupid indulgent tears! Signs of weakness. Signs of powerlessness before the things over which we ought to have had control.

If you are powerful, you don't need to cry . . . We might think this when we are fourteen, going on fifteen. Maybe at sixteen (going on sixty) we might have first thoughts about integrity, vulnerability - wondering about whether the secret ingredient in tears might be love . . .

-ooOoo-

One last indulgence! During my twenties, as trickles of news arrived in Dunedin from Auckland, concerning my sister's gradual loss of vision, I would often drink lots gin. The mother's ruin has a reputation as a weepy drink. I used to think my tears were for my sister. Maybe they were, but maybe that was only part of a broader sadness. Whatever; I remember thinking to myself that one day it would be nice to cry dry tears - tears not fuelled by gin.

1990, having spent time in Northern Ireland with my father's family, I am leaving by ferry to go back to England, and then on to Aotearoa. From the railing of the very tall ferry, I'm looking down to the wharf, where my sister is standing with my cousin Peter - they have come to see me off. I look at them, the boat beings to move away. I have a sudden

realisation that these are the tears I had longed for. No gin. No indulgence. Just gratitude for time, and for people who are close. Just awareness that good things come (when the dying's done). We are not ashamed. We cry. And because Jesus wept, God is in the crying.

A moment of quiet.

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