Most of us, when we’re past our childhood, don’t cry very often. Yet, stoic national stereotypes notwithstanding, our culture often places a high value on public tears. Sociologically a shift is sometimes traced to the 1990s: in the World Cup semi-final at the opening of that decade, hard man footballer Paul Gascoigne famously wept in the middle of a match; and after the death of the Princess of Wales in 1997 one of the chief accusations made against the Royal family was that they didn’t show enough public emotion. Twenty or more years on we seem to be in the grip of a kind of social schizophrenia here: sometimes we behave as if tears are the guarantee of authentic feeling, but we’re also more than a little suspicious of public lachrymosity. Actors weeping as they collect their Oscars, or the rent-a-sob emotion of daytime television, remind us that tears are certainly not the gold standard of genuine feeling.

What should we make then of the tears in today’s gospel? At one level the story of the raising of Lazarus comes across a bit like a political party conference – stage-managed down to the last detail. The participants – Mary and Martha and the disciples – may think they’re freely influencing Jesus, but, behind the scenes, decisions have already been made. We’re presented with a Jesus who knows the outcome long before it happens and who seems content to spin out events to an almost callous degree:

...when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of man may be glorified through it”...[And] he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

This is John’s gospel at its most uncompromising, portraying an imperious Jesus who seems to take little account of the needs and weaknesses of those around him.

But we should never underestimate the subtlety of the fourth gospel. Between the stark outlines of today’s reading we can see the colours of another story: a much more tender account of human suffering – of death, mourning and love. When Mary meets him two miles outside Bethany Jesus still seems untouched by the news of Lazarus’s death. But as Jesus approaches the village, Mary’s sister, Martha, comes out to meet him. Martha’s words are identical to Mary’s, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died’, but unlike her sister, Martha falls at Jesus’s feet and weeps. And in that instant the mood of the story changes. As Martha drops to her knees in grief in front of Jesus, we find ourselves directly engaging with the sharp, dusty reality of human life and death. ‘When Jesus saw her weeping... he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...[and he] began to weep.’

Why Jesus waited those two extra days before coming to Bethany we cannot know – maybe there was a greater need for him where he was; or maybe, as some commentators rather grimly say, it was so to make sure Lazarus really was dead. The prevailing belief at
the time was that the soul left the body only at some point after death, so perhaps it might
have been objected that Jesus’s action was merely a resuscitation if he had intervened too
promptly. We cannot know; but what we do know is that the Jesus who raises Lazarus
from the dead is not some lofty superman, but a person like you and me, grieving, shaken
and human. This miracle is not an act of calm, majestic power, but one that embodies the
hope that love is stronger even than death.

It’s Jesus’s tears – the moment when our Lord meets Martha weeping and begins to weep
himself – that mark the turning point in the story. And, if we look elsewhere in the gospels,
we find that Jesus’s tears always mark such points of engagement: his tears over Jerusalem;
his tears in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his passion. Tears are the water that
irrigates the dry earth of death, they are signs of God’s Spirit, which is the breath of life
within us. They are like the breath of the Lord enlivening the dry bones in our OT reading:

‘And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and
bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within
you and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall
know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act’, says the Lord.

Both today’s readings are about new life. They anticipate the great transforming reality at
the heart of our faith, the resurrection of Christ. But, although these readings are about
new life, they are also just as clearly about death. There is no mistaking the fact that
Lazarus, whom Jesus raises, is really dead; the corruption of his body has already begun to
produce a stench. And to modern eyes and ears the bones that Ezekiel sees in the valley
are more than just a striking image. They are the bones of the mass graves of our age: of
Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, of Bosnia, Saddleworth Moor and Rwanda.

There is, it seems, no end to our human capacity to be inhuman: the scale of our
inhumanity chastens and appals us. But, chastened though we are, we should be no less
chastened – chastened and amazed – by the scale of God’s love for our human race, the
redemption he extends to us in Christ. Today we enter the final two weeks of Lent, the
season known as Passiontide. And as we do so, it’s to the Passion of Christ that we turn,
his suffering for us on the Cross.

This year Passiontide and Holy Week are going to be unlike any we’ve experienced before.
But despite everything this fortnight is, as always, our great annual opportunity to learn
once again the truth of God’s love: living and dying and living again in the passion and
resurrection of Christ. Usually we walk these days together: keeping step with our Lord in
his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to the upper room, to trial, Cross, death and burial; then,
unimaginably, to the empty space within the tomb which opens for us a new world of hope
on Easter Day. This year we will do so alone or in tiny clusters, weeping no doubt (as
many have already) at the company of which we’re deprived.

But as, by whatever means are available to us, we follow the liturgy and as we keep our
hearts open to God’s Spirit, we will find once again that these days show us again how
utterly real Christ’s sacrificial love is: real in those events two thousand years ago in
Jerusalem, equally real in our lives here and now. Our self-deception will be met with
God’s truth; our ugliness be transfigured by God’s beauty; our self-pity healed by God’s
love; our isolation overcome by the company of the one who is always nearer to us than
we are to ourselves.

In the words of John Donne’s Litany:

Hear us, O hear us, Lord; to Thee
A sinner is more music, when he prays,
   Than spheres' or angels' praises be,
In panegyric alleluias ;
        Hear us, for till Thou hear us, Lord,
   We know not what to say ;
Thine ear to our sighs, tears, thoughts, gives voice and word;
O Thou, who Satan heard'st in Job's sick day,
Hear Thyself now, for Thou in us dost pray.

In nomine...