

To give Tolstoy his due, despite his, perhaps, idealisation of family life as either happy in one similar way only or unhappy in many differing ways, his presentation of human characters as torn by a welter of emotions at the best and worst of times is superb. He honours the complexity we both enjoy and suffer as human beings: a complexity that can make even friends into enemies in a moment and feelings of love into hate in an instant. This volatility seems to be our lot, whether through natural causes or through sin. And as the psalms and the lamentations of Jeremiah which we heard this morning make so clear, this volatility is not new and culminates for us today in the Passion and death of Jesus Christ. We leave Jesus, today, dead and buried in a tomb and we are meant to feel this as a great loss; to share in the pain of his beloved disciples, personified, above all, in the presence of his mother Mary, with the other Marys, at the foot of the Cross, for a mother knows the pain of losing a child in a way that a man can never fully understand – flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone: a love engrafted in her body's memory though the pain and joy of childbirth. This differing take on both birth and death is wonderfully brought out by Tolstoy in his account of Kitty and Levin's first child and I wonder if we can dare amend his introductory remark that 'All happy families resemble one another and every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion' to 'All families resemble one another in the complexity of their emotions and to know happiness in Christ is to know unhappiness too'.

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