

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 6 October 2013

Lamentations 1: 1-6

Ps 137

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17: 5-10

May our hearts be open to your presence, O God of all time. Amen

A friend of ours tells stories of her time in Afghanistan. It was not so long ago – 35 years or so – and she talks of an austere beautiful country of agricultural abundance, of a society that was open and tolerant, a society where children were educated, regardless of their sex or class. Her photos are full of markets with spices and dried fruits piled high, of laughing children, of smiling people. Such is not the case today.

Syria, once a country of culture, tolerance and peace, is tearing itself apart: 300 people a day are dying, more than 2 million of the 22 million population have now left and are refugees.

Across my email traffic in the last couple of weeks have come emails from two Anglican colleagues, both bishops, reaching out to each other in compassion and lament: one in Connecticut where people are still grieving the lives lost in the Sandy Hook massacre, the other in Pakistan where 78 people were killed a couple of weeks ago as they left church on Sunday morning.

Each day we are confronted with the chaos of our world: Afghanistan, Syria, insurgents killing innocent shoppers in a mall in Nairobi; apparently random shootings in the United States and in Western Sydney.

And the ancient words of lament from the Hebrew Scriptures in today's first reading reach across the millennia articulating the grief of lost power and lost peace, then, as now.

The Hebrews knew, as indeed their descendants, the Jewish people, still know, that there is a time for lament. The text we have read today is the very first section of the Hebrew book Eikhah, almost certainly written in the 6th century BCE following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonians in 587/586.

The Book of Lamentations, as we call it, consists of a series of five poems reflecting on the destruction of Jerusalem. Through a variety of speakers they give vivid short pictures of the horrors of the siege and its aftermath, they reflect on the causes of the disaster and appeal to God for mercy. Although tradition assigns authorship to Jeremiah, modern scholars believe that it is the work of poets and pastoral leaders who worked with the demoralised survivors of that time and pulled together existing streams of thought and expression into this powerful and innovative expression of grief.

Some of its force is lost to those of us who read the text in translation. It comes from a tight literary structure, based on the acrostic. The laments are structured by taking the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order at the

beginning of each verse and then, in the final chapter, using 22 short verses. The aim, as one scholar says, 'seems to have been to foster a comprehensive catharsis of grief and confession linked to an inculcation of faith and hope, to be accomplished literally by covering the subject "from A to Z".'¹ It may seem impossibly artificial and contrived but the tightness of the structure imposes constraints on the language, allowing exploration of deep trauma within the safety of linguistic boundaries. It's as if the constraints provide a brake on the emotion, ensuring it never becomes uncontrollable. And just as anger expressed in a very controlled fashion has an added impact on those who see it, so too does the grief expressed in this tight literary form carry us into a depth of feeling.

Here is a way to reflect, to grieve, perhaps to repent, certainly to search for God's truth, in the midst of trauma. Lament is a necessary point on our journeys through grief, whether that grief is a personal grief or a communal grief. It is where we look honestly at what has been lost. It is for this reason that the service of Tenebrae, one of the traditional services of Holy Week, uses passages from the Book of Lamentations. As we gather together year by year and re-tell the story of Christ's death and resurrection, so we connect the stories of our lives with that of Jesus and of the Jewish people. And as we do that, so we acknowledge the universality of grief and loss.

Lament is present elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, notably in the Psalms, many of which are psalms of lament. These are not peevish complaints in fancy language. They are not about victimhood, nor about wallowing in grief. Rather, as one scholar poetically expresses it, 'lament does not stand by itself but, like the second movement of a symphony, moves through the minor strain to the major key of the final movement, from petition, out of distress to joyful praise of God.'²

As we pour out our distress to God, so we are gradually freed from its burden and can move into a future which is radically different from the past, but one in which God is no less present.

Through their sufferings and their wanderings the Jewish people came to understand God's presence with them, wherever they were – Egypt, the wilderness, Canaan, Babylon. God did not abandon the people, even when they were in exile. This is the deep truth that gives lament its hope.

And it is the deep truth that brings hope in our days as well – even those days when the shadows of darkness seem to gather. Lament is not denial, it is not a search for a solution, it is not an anaesthetic for pain. It is a leaning on the heart of God.

This poem by American spiritual director and writer Joyce Rupp speaks to this. Although she writes from the point of view of an individual, the experience holds true for communities as well:

¹ Norman Gottwald, Lamentations, in Harper's Bible Commentary, p. 647

² B W Anderson, The Living World of the Old Testament 3rd Edition, p. 516

Leaning on the Heart of God

I am leaning on the heart of God.
I am resting there in silence.
All the turmoil that exhausts me
is brought to bear on this great love.

No resistance or complaint is heard
as I lean upon God's welcome.
There is gladness for my coming.
There is comfort for my pain.

I lean, and lean, and lean
upon this heart that hurts with me.
Strength lifts the weight of my distress.
Courage wraps around my troubles.

No miracle of instant recovery.
No taking away of life's burdens.
Yet, there is solace for my soul,
and refuge for my exiled tears.

It is enough for me to know
the heart of God is with me,
full of mercy and compassion,
tending to the wounds I bear.

(Joyce Rupp, from 'Out of the Ordinary', p 75)

It is from this place of lament and leaning that new paths into the future can be discerned, from this confidence that hope is born. And so the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for all its problems, has enabled oppressed and oppressor to tell their stories, to lament the years of apartheid, and been a crucial factor in South Africa's transition to democracy. Similar processes in other countries have helped people come to terms with dreadful atrocities. Only by facing the truth of what has happened are people freed to live and love in community again. In the soil of lament, new life grows, nurtured by God's loving presence. Amen.

Sarah Macneil

October 2013