

From Lament to hope – Lamentations 1:1-6

In the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary, we turn to the book of Lamentations only once – and it is quite a shocking reading, because it's not the sort of thing that we expect to hear read in church. It is bleak, it is depressing, it is sad, it is a lamentation.

The book of Lamentations was written during the Babylonian Exile, around the middle of the sixth century BC – at around the same time as Psalm 137 'by the rivers of Babylon' was composed.

Lamentations consists of five poems, which give us the five chapters of the book. The first four poems are alphabetic acrostics—poems in which each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Traditionally, it's held that the book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah, and the content fits what we know about Jeremiah as the 'weeping prophet', but the weight of opinion amongst scholars these days is that it was probably not Jeremiah, but someone who knew him.

We have this collection of mournful poems, written at a time of great anguish and despair for the ancient people of God, which come to us as part of our scriptures today, and we can easily find ourselves wondering 'why?'. We can turn to Paul's second letter to Timothy and learn that 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness', and wonder how on earth the opening verses of the book of Lamentations are useful for those things?

I often contemplate the words – the poetry – of Ecclesiastes 3, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die" and so on. The writer lists the activities of our lives, but he pairs them – born and die, plant and uproot, weep and laugh, mourn and dance, and on and on. They are the things of all our lives,

I've commented in the past that joy is the most neglected part of the fruit of the Spirit, and that the modern church doesn't do joy well – we make our faith a very solemn and serious thing. The opposite of joy, though, isn't solemnity – it's sadness.

We are not very good at sadness and lamenting, either. If something upsets modern people – not just Christians – we tend to go for anger and rebuke rather than lament. We shout slogans about things, demand action and retribution, but don't shed so many tears.

But here, in today's reading, we're confronted with a lament.

It's not only the book of Lamentations, though: Of the 150 psalms, more than a third of them are generally considered to be laments – they express sorrow, despair and anguish. Think of Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" or Psalm 88 "Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? Your wrath has swept over me..." or our lament today "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept"

Those psalms and the book of Lamentations were considered important enough not only to be sung or prayed at the time, but also to be written down, to form part of the canon of the nation. Ancient Judah was a tough place to be, and people had a hard time. And they shared that with God.

And just like those ancient people, when we are sad or despairing or mourning, we should be sharing that with God too. There is a time to tear down, a time to weep and a time to mourn.

It is okay to share our feelings with God, even the ones we might be embarrassed about, to bring him our biggest concerns - and if we're angry with God then we shouldn't pretend otherwise.

I don't know how many people here remember being two years old, but when you're two years old and some problem occurs in your life, you tell your parents about it, and they solve it – or at least get you through it.

But as we grow up, we stop sharing our problems with our parents, we try and solve problems ourselves - we don't think that we should rely on our parents so much. We might let them help with things involving transport, notes to school or, most of all, money – but they cease to be the all-powerful problem solvers they once were.

And I wonder if we, as Christians, haven't grown similarly. Do we share our problems, our concerns, our sadness or our grief with God?

As we come to realise that it's okay for us to lament, we also need to recognise that it's okay for others to lament too, and express those emotions, to cry out to God when they are in dark places.

When we see others in despair, we should be acknowledging that despair, we should appreciate that things aren't right for them. And I think we should not only acknowledge their despair, but we should be praying with them too.

It's easy to fall into thinking that the Good News leads to joy, and that if people are not joyful and happy, if they are disappointed in things, or even if they are depressed, that there is something wrong with their relationship with God – and it's their fault.

And while joy is part of the fruit of spirit, Jesus makes it clear that his followers won't be free of suffering, or as Paul comments in 2 Corinthians “we commend ourselves... in great endurance, in troubles, hardships and distresses”.

We know that Jesus went through those feelings, too, because Jesus was truly human. He wept at the deaths of John the Baptist and Lazarus; he wept for the city of Jerusalem.

I'm always struck in the Easter story by the anguish of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – Jesus is crying out to God the father – “if there is any other way...” Being in anguish, and in despair and crying out to God isn't a sign of a failed relationship with God, it's a sign of being human.

That anguish and despair is what the writer of Lamentations captures in today's Old Testament reading. He begins, "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave."

The city of Jerusalem had been a bustling city, full of people with a thriving economy. People came to the city for pilgrimage, for festivals and for trade. The priests tended to their duties at the temple, and the people's relationship with God – at least on the face of it – was good.

But now, the city has fallen, and it is empty – thousands upon thousands had been killed in the siege of the city by the Babylonians, and almost all of the survivors carried off to exile.

This lament portrays Jerusalem as a woman who has been widowed and a queen who has become a slave. In that age, women depended on their husbands to sustain them, and widows were vulnerable, and they were often reduced to desperate circumstances financially and subject to exploitation (Psalm 94:6; Isaiah 1:23; Ezekiel 22:7). Jerusalem – symbolic of the people of God – had similarly fallen.

The pain of loss is ongoing for the people – the second verse of the lament tells us that the city weeps, there is no one to comfort the people of God, and they have been betrayed by their former friends.

If things are bad, it is always worse to be alone. How much better are things when we have someone who loves us to comfort us? A kind word, a hand held, a warm embrace, in the face of whatever we are facing.

How much better is it, that we When we have a problem, it is great people around us to support us, to ask, "How can we help?"—or "Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it." But Jerusalem – the people – had no one, they were exiled in a foreign land. Where, as the psalmist told us, they sat down and wept.

The other nations had become greater than Judah, and the remnant in exile in Babylon had become servants to them.

We heard that "The roads to Zion [Jerusalem] mourn...[and]...the gateways are desolate". Before the Babylonians came, the roads had been busy with commerce and pilgrims coming to worship at the temple, but now, those roads were nearly empty and the gates quiet. The writer says that the priests groan – now there was no temple or sacrifices, and the priests were either dead or in exile too.

The writer contrasts the position of the people Judah in exile with the other nations. The writer tells us the other nations have become Judah's masters – and their enemies are now 'at ease'.

At the end of verse 5, we have a declaration that sits very uncomfortably with us "The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe."

If this was God's judgement on Judah, what does it mean for us today? In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, many people thought it was God judging the US, because it was suggested that America was increasingly sinful. It makes sense that God would withdraw from people who had withdrawn from him, doesn't it? Didn't America do the wrong thing? And wasn't it entirely reasonable that God would punish them?

If God is really in charge, and such things happen to people, the logical explanation must be that they somehow deserved it. God must be punishing us for something we've done when bad things happen, right?

Should we be worried that God will withdraw his presence from our society or our lives? Because I'm sure we all think things like that from time to time, although we're probably doing the right thing and it is others that are doing wrong and should be punished.

Things have changed since the time the people of God sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon. Sure enough, in 539 BC, Cyrus of Persia freed the exiles, and they would return to Jerusalem and rebuild.

As we read through the Old Testament, we see a pattern of the people turning away from God, suffering some consequence of that – invasion or exile – and the people turning back to God. If a cycle, bad and good, just like the times that the writer of Ecclesiastes described. But whatever bad things happened, God always provided a way back to him.

And in Jesus, we have a permanent, a perfect, way back to God.

We heard it in our reading from Paul's letter to Timothy today, "He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

Jesus said "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."(Matthew 28:19-20)"

And Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;" (1 Corinthians 6:19)

The poems – the laments – of the book of Lamentations are disturbing – not just for what they describe itself, but what it meant for God's chosen people during the Babylonian exile. They were in despair, in anguish, because they'd turned away from their relationship with God. Before the Babylonians arrived at the walls, the people of Judah would have claimed that God was their God, and they were God's people.

But to truly be God's people they had to live as God wanted to live, and not give in to jealousy, self-indulgence and self-sufficiency and self-importance.

We are blessed to live this side of the cross, the cross on which Jesus died for us, and this side of his glorious resurrection. We can know God's presence, not in a city, but in our hearts and our lives.

Amen.