

How long, O God?

Psalms 74:1-14

Lament is a word that has come to have a richer and more sombre meaning over this last year, and the Psalms often catch this poignantly. “The faith of Israel, like all human experience, moved back and forth between the polar moods of, deep anguish and misery and, on the other hand, profound joy and celebration...It is the lament that preserves for us (in the Psalms the) most powerful and eloquent statements of the effort both to survive and to be transformed as a people of faith.”ⁱ

A lament is a cry from the heart. A lament can be like sobbing in song. A lament can be wordless and caught in music. A lament can occasionally be silent and caught in the anguish of a painting. Lament can lie heavy upon the air. I remember visiting Leningrad, as it was then, in 1980, and visiting the war graves that had been created at the time of the great siege in World War Two that lasted for nearly 900 days, with over a million people dying, and nearly 90% of those dying of hunger.

I remember visiting the Yad Vashem holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, commemorating the six million Jews and others who perished under the Nazis and finding the recollections of so many lost lives and lost communities almost unbearable.

I remember dedicating a little garden of remembrance for still-born and miscarried infants, on a hillside at the edge of Cupar Cemetery, where there were barely words to be said to express the hurt and the loss of families.

Last week at different times on the 23rd March many marked the first anniversary of the lockdown, and the thousands of lives lost, and the millions more whose lives have been impacted by the effect of the Coronavirus. We remembered not only the people lost, but the jobs, and the relationships, and the opportunities, and the celebrations. We lamented the loss of being together with loved ones. Perhaps above all we lamented the loss of touch. On one programme I remembered hearing about a grandmother who lamented not having hugged her grandchildren for over a year. “My arms are hungry”, she said.

“Lament is a corrective for some expressions of religion in church that wish to withdraw from life as it really is, to pretence and romance in the unreal world of heavenly or holy things. The lament makes clear that faith and worship deal with and are shaped by life as it comes to us.”ⁱⁱ

Psalm 74 is a psalm of lament, possibly marking a time of national disaster. People are feeling forgotten and rejected by God. The community of faith is in crisis. Is God angry with them? There places of worship have been destroyed, including the Temple in Jerusalem: “perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.” The building has been hacked with axes and broken with hatchets and hammers, and then set on fire. Their call to God is to ‘Remember’ them – not an act of nostalgia, but a cry for help and for God to do something. “Direct Your steps”, or more literally, “Lift up Your steps...” In other words, get a move on, God! The laments are addressed to someone, the greatest doubts, bitterest resentments, and deepest anger. We learn an important lesson from this psalm: we don’t need to fake it or be polite and pretend in God’s presence, nor indeed face our hurt alone.

In a time of bereavement or loss, one of the hardest things to do is to enable people, or help people, express their hurt and their grief. For generations where we were told that big boys, and girls, don’t cry; that we ought to maintain a stiff upper lip. I’m reminded of the Marge Simpson, the blue-haired matriarch in the Simpsons cartoon, advising her daughter Lisa after some bitter disappointment:

“It doesn’t matter how you feel inside, you know. It’s what shows up on the outside that counts. Take all your bad feelings and push them down, all the way down, past your knees, until you’re almost walking on them.”

Psalm 74 would not be for her, where permission is taken, even demanded, to express out loud the anguish that emanates from fear. “Here is a community, ‘enveloped in darkness so thick that there does not appear so much as a single ray of light.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the cry of the isolated old woman, longing to be released from her lockdown home and meet up with friends. This is the cry of the bed-bound child in hospital, longing to be well again. This is the cry of the heart-broken teenager, uncertain if they’ll ever find love. This is the cry of the redundant worker, ‘let go’ again from yet another job. “How long, O God?” The psalm was a favourite amongst the persecuted in the C17th, the Huguenots in France and the Covenanters here in Scotland.

This is the robust, soul-cleansing cry of a people in distress, angrily but faithfully challenging God to do something to redress the situation. “Why don’t you?” says the Psalmist. Why do you sit there, as it were twiddling your thumbs?...End it!^{iv}

There is something cathartic about lament, honest lament, that moves the hurt soul from the inside to the outside. That moves the sufferer from an interior despair and hopelessness to a focussed prayer that leads to action.

It’s what happens in this Psalm. Lament, despair, anger, but engagement with God. Even in the darkness, a hand from the believer reaches out to God, to get a grip on the Almighty, and to acknowledge that not only is God still there, but that God does indeed have the power and the intention to help. It’s not easy. It doesn’t come without a struggle. There maybe sacrifice. The hurt may continue for a time, but having got the feelings expressed, verbalised, out there in the open, our relationship to God, and God’s to us, comes back into focus. We don’t sit back and wait for God to act; we step forward to work with God to make the difference we desire to see. After it drains us, lament can energise us and propel us out of darkness and into light. If we put our hand into God’s, and let Him pull us through emotionally, physically, spiritually. Through lament, with God, we will come through.

A psalm like this not only speaks to our understanding of Holy Week, and the sense of devastation that the impending crucifixion has on us since we know what is coming next. The psalm also speaks to us as we emerge, again, from lockdown. The darkness is around. It will not lift easily or swiftly. Its effect will last for some time as our world, and our lives within the world reshape.

The Church will not emerge from this time unscathed. We rightly lament a lost year, and along with it lost people, lost opportunities, lost loved ones, lost hopes. But the story does not end in lament, but rejoicing. The story does not end in tears, but laughter. The story does not end in darkness, but light.

It is important to lament, but equally important not to get stuck there. Perhaps it’s a tendency the more dour Scots need to address in their approach to faith. The writer P G Woodhouse wryly

commented, "It is never difficult to distinguish between a Scotsman with a grievance from a ray of sunshine."^v

Lament, cry out in the darkness, as this Psalm does; be angry in the time of the despair, as this Psalm is. But beyond, and there is always a beyond in Christian faith, lies the reaching God, Who does not wait passively, but stretches and moves forward actively, to meet us, to hold us, to help us, to heal us. How long, O God? Until the darkness ends, and the light comes.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms. The Life of Faith*, p67

ⁱⁱ Ibid p67

ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin in Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship*, p238

^{iv} Davidson, *ibid*, pps238-239

^v P G Woodhouse, *Blandings Castle*