

Great is Thy faithfulness*Lamentations 3:19-26; II Timothy 1:1-14*

When I began to prepare the sermon for this communion Sunday I confess my heart sank a little when the title to one of the commentary chapters read, *Third Dirge*. After a week where I have taken two funerals and prepared for three more the irony was not lost on me.

After a week which contained the atrocities at the Jewish synagogue in Manchester, were the children of Israel at worship on the holiest day of the Jewish Year, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement and repentance, gathered as Jews did all over the world to seek forgiveness from both God and others and terror struck, *Third Dirge* fitted the bill with tragic irony.

What do we do with our tragedies and hurts and pains, and that awful word, 'sin'? How do we wrestle with a world that has gone so badly wrong in so many ways? When we can't bear to look at the devastation of Gaza. Or the unbelievable tensions in drone-shadowed Ukraine and Russia. Or the latest dangerous non-sequiturs emanating from the senior officials of the United States. Or the school ground bickering from UK political party conferences where their aims so often, from every side, seem to 'do down the others' and not build up the whole of our society? Maybe three dirges aren't enough for these anxious, angry, antagonistic days through which we pick our way as ordinary women and men, looking for something to hope for, to live for, to believe in.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah, awkward, crunchy, jarring, may well speak from the 6th BC into our time today. This bitter little book of the Bible bears witness to the voices of unrelenting lament rising from the rubble of Jerusalem in 587 BC after it had been devastated by the armies of Babylon. How could this unthinkable catastrophe have happened? How could a proud and significant nation have been brought so low, its leadership killed or exiled. How could God's

temple be destroyed, the place where the Jews of ancient Israel believed where God lived on earth?

In our time, how, from where we have been, could the wonders of God's creation and the glory of humanity have brought us to this low ebb? Listening to you over these last weeks, in and around the Church, the question, 'when is it going to end - this pain and frustration and grief and misery?' Enough, O Lord, enough!

Christian faith, if it cannot speak into bad times; Christian faith, if it cannot sit alongside hurting people; Christian faith, if it cannot determine, somehow, despite everything, to soldier on, doesn't amount to much. What we believe and why we believe and how we believe has to, at some point, get to that place which physically, and emotionally, and spiritually gets us up off our knees and begin to try - *begin* to try, to find hope from anywhere, or somewhere, or nowhere.

When our hands and hearts and angry questions reach out into the darkness to find something that approximates to God, what kind of comfort does God offer to hurting people? Too many are too quick to dismiss the first two thirds of the Bible, assuming that it is about a different God - who takes delight in the destruction of wayward human beings by storms and floods and wars and disaster. Too many want to skip right to the New Testament God of love and forgiveness. Miss out all the hard stuff. Skim over the unpleasantness. Body-swerve the bad news. Nobody wants to see pain and misery and suffering. When it comes, not from God, but nearly always by some human action or inaction, some human cruelty or selfishness or thoughtlessness, we need to find God Who will help us cope with that, before we get to the good stuff. Life isn't fair, nor is it always right, but learning *from* it we cope *with* it. And by coping with it we begin, I believe, to deal with it and get passed it or over it or through it. A God only capable of being with us in the

bright sunny upland days is of little use in the emptiness of grief, or the devastation of unemployment, or the numbing reality of not enough money, or the bleakness of loneliness.

The God of the resurrection morning must also be the God of the splintered cross and the stone-darkened tomb of Good Friday. The God of the joy of healing and enough to eat and happy friends needs also to be the God of the broken heart and the ruined city and the shattered dreams.

Elie Wiesel was a Romanian-born American writer, professor, political activist, and Holocaust survivor, best known for his book '*Night*,' which recounts his experiences in Nazi concentration camps. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 for his efforts to combat indifference and promote human rights. He wrestled with faith and doubt, and once wrote. *"I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I am closer to Him for that reason."*

It almost echoes the verse from Lamentations which provides a hinge of hope: *"But this I call to mind... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope..."* What Jeremiah finds is that somehow, almost unbelievably, in the midst of or at the end of the grim time, God still loves! There is still hope! God is all there is, and so we need to find ways to put our hope in God. Not an abdication of our responsibility and need to act too; but a belief in a partnership with God in the tough times that inspires us to do something to change our world and to tackle the things that hurt and harm and hamper.

Sitting in the ruins of life; sitting in a hospital waiting room after bad news; sitting on your own after a job fell through; or an interview didn't go your way; or a promise of help was broken; or someone died; in *those* dark places when the spark of faith comes, and something stirs in the heart or mind or soul, we find strength within ourselves, with others, with God, not to give in or give up or give out.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness."

The indomitability and unquenched human spirit, which is, I believe, a spark of God's hope in each one of us can be the very thing that keeps us going, and keeps us trying, and keeps us moving forward.

The spirit that infused countries like Britain, along with others, to stand up against the threat of Nazi totalitarianism when many voices said, 'Give up, give in, you can't win.'

The spirit that infused men and women, like Martin Luther King, to take the principled stand against racial prejudice and injustice when the weight of society and establishment looked immovable and the dream impossible.

The spirit that continues to infuse medical and scientific researchers to find cures for diseases that blight human life.

The spirit that continues to infuse supporters of charities to find ways in a cash-strapped world to support causes that inch by inch keep poverty and homelessness and loneliness at bay, and in some instances, turn them around.

The kind of spirit we will need in our church (and we're not the only church or charity) to face the significant financial challenges that threaten our future, by learning how to locate and utilise generosity of time, talents and money so that the part of God's kingdom given to us to look after might continue to provide the welcome, light and hope that we offer day after day.

The kind of spirit that you will need to get through this next week. I never know what some of you are facing at home, or school, or university, or work, or wherever. But that it might be tough, or frightening, or diminishing, for you and for people you love.

The kind of spirit found, unbelievably, in the miserable little Book of Lamentations. Life can be pretty mean and miserable, and it is rarely smooth or fair. But... *But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope... The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness.*"

The kind of spirit that can lead to resistance amid the ruins. That can lead to genuine ability to survive and even thrive in the midst of the rubble of today's world in this present darkness. Here is the good news in a third dirge. Waiting and seeking. Seeking and doing; to make things different. The lived-out, practical expression of our fierce faith. Take heart. Have hope. God with His friends is still there for us and with us.

Great is Thy faithfulness.

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

Amen