

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity, 30 June 2024, Year B, Proper 9,
Readings: Lamentations 3.22-33, Psalm 30, 2 Corinthians 8.7-end, Mark 5.21-43

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

At the beginning of the pandemic that engulfed our globalised world from late 2019 until 2023 people within the church were urging pastors and others amongst the people of God to familiarise themselves with the notion of lament as captured in the Book of Lamentations. Well known figures within the Church such as N. T. Wright, the biblical scholar and John Lennox, the scientist and apologist were amongst them.

What is lament? It is a deep and passionate expression of grief or sorrow. At the time of the pandemic we grieved the loss of familiar ways. Ways of life we had taken for granted such as visiting friends, mobility (freedom of movement), going out for dinner, to the theatre, to the gym etc. Loved ones could not be visited or visiting was limited to a few select people including carers who too separated from their nearest and dearest. Many were separated at a time when normally they would have been at the bedside of loved ones as they gave birth or as they died. Overnight our big lives became small in a manner for which we were ill prepared. We were taken up short. There was a great sense of loss for what we had known and what had come to hold us, the little patterns of our lives that in time turn into habits that anchor us day by day. There was lament.

Preparing this sermon I realised I personally still lament that during the first lockdown we were unable to be with my mother for her 100th birthday celebrations with her friends and family at the outset of the first lockdown. All who were invited said they were coming some seventy persons. The table was figuratively set. It would have been a great celebration and mum would have loved it.

We could no longer go to church on Sundays or gather during the week for worship. Some of us will have missed this enormously as it is a part of who we are. Others sadly we must admit to

ourselves less so, because whether they attend worship (church) or not is not central to their lives nor is it considered a duty and a joy, but rather an optional extra, a take it or leave it, as it fits into my calendar. It is not amongst the priorities of each week. As we reflect on that time of loss lament will have been one of the emotions that will have engulfed us whether we are familiar with the concept of lament or not.

The background to the Book of Lamentations is the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Babylonians with the accompanying deportation of its inhabitants to Babylon in 587 BCE. Those who remain, who are left behind in Jerusalem and especially the author of the Book of Lamentations laments, he mourns the loss of the life he has known. He laments the loss of the Holy Place, the Temple (his church) in which the Lord's Presence was said to dwell and from which holiness emanated.

The author understands the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of its elites as God's judgement on his people, who have turned from God and for which they are rightly punished. Actions have consequences. This notion that God punishes us for our actions is one that does not sit well with moderns. The notion that God is justly angry with our wilfulness our sinfulness is one we find hard to entertain. It has little currency. Yes, as the Psalmist writes, 'The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.' (Psalm 145:8) But there is another side that we have become blind to even though God sets our sins as far apart as the east is from the west, God is also justly angered by our sin. (Psalm 103:12) We take God's mercy for granted. We do not take our sin seriously and so we are out of kilter with ourselves as individuals, as families, amongst friends, as communities, as nations and amongst the nations of the world and our God. It is not of God's making, but of our own making. "Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." (Lamentations 3:33)

In the world of the Bible nothing is outside the providence of God. God is in control. God acts. He looks down from his heavenly throne... and sees what we are making of his creation which we

are called to till and maintain, to cultivate and keep. (Genesis 2:15) He sees the strife between loved ones, within families, churches, within nations and between nations who all say they long for peace, but in their longing for peace seem to be moving day by day a little further away from that which they say with their lips they long for... Peace. The notion that God might chastise us meaning correct us, reprimand us is one we find difficult to take as seriously we must. The much loved Lutheran theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) spoke of 'cheap grace'. The grace that we claim for ourselves that costs us nothing, but to rock up to church possibly from time to time for worship if that.

Most people in the West do not inhabit a world in which God has authority let alone sovereignty. To be in any meaningful sense accountable to God for our actions by which we aggrrieve God is for most an affront. This is not the world the author of the Book of Lamentations inhabits as he laments the loss of what he and others had known as it causes him great distress.

See, O Lord, how distressed I am;
my stomach churns,
my heart is wrung within me,
because I have been very rebellious.
In the street the sword bereaves;
in the house it is like death. (Lamentations 1.20)

And yet as he suffers, as he laments the loss of the way of life he has come to know and has 'carelessly' forfeited with his people, a way of life he took for granted, there is still something he can hold on to as he articulates in words the overwhelming emotions of lament that go to the core of his being. This 'something' is found within the third chapter of the Book of Lamentations. There we find the nugget embedded that is the reading set for today. More or less in the centre of chapter three and therefore within the Book itself, which has five chapters. It is the anchor! Despite the tragedy that has befallen his people, the city, the temple, their way of life and himself, he has come to know God and God even in his lament as his anchor. He has hope. All is hope for tomorrow is founded on God. He must be patient. God is faithful even though he and his people

have been unfaithful. For the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies endure to the end. So wait, wait quietly for the Lord and know that He is God.

I must point out that the Book of Leviticus is similarly structured. In the heart of Leviticus we find a second nugget. It is initially surprising to find it in a book about laws and more laws thereby making a subtle point I will return to in a minute. In Leviticus we find the much-quoted words 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Actually it reads, 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.' And the whole sentence reads, 'You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.' (Leviticus 19.18) The Law is given that we may come to respect one another and by its observance and through mutual observance come to love each other. If love is to be more than an emotion like the morning mist then it must be tilled and maintained, and it must be cultivated and kept.

Above I mentioned the notion of 'cheap grace', which has taken hold of liberal churches and would seem to be leading to their demise as articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

"Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheap goods (cheapjack's wares, Billigware). The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap?... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

The point I take away from this is that we can take grace for granted, Bonhoeffer would say immensely so, and can fail to remember and consider its costs. Costly grace according to Bonhoeffer is grace with repentance (with turning), grace with discipline, grace with personal confession, grace with discipleship, grace with the Cross, grace with Jesus Christ at the centre by

coming to him the source of light and life and truth. See Jairus, the leader of the synagogue who comes to Jesus on behalf of his daughter. See the woman who comes to Jesus plagued by a condition of haemorrhaging that she has had for twelve years.

And it is from today's reading from the Book of Lamentations and its theological import that we get a much loved hymn only written in 1923, 'Great is thy faithfulness!'

"Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy faithfulness!"
Morning by morning new mercies I see; ...
Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

There is a challenge or indeed a number of challenges in the words spoken above that I hope you haven't missed and will take seriously or least consider. We find so many blessings in our little Christian community, but for the blessings to be of God they must be founded on the consolations of God as made known and grounded in Jesus Christ. 'The steadfastness of the love never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness.' Please, I beg you, let us not return to business as usual! **Amen.**