

Psalms of Lament – Lent 3 – 15/03/2023 – St Giles Aintree

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My previous talk, before Roddy last week, was on setting the scene for our studies and introducing the psalms.

I have drawn the short straw and we will be lamenting today. Instead, we will be praying, listening, singing, writing, colouring and hopefully learning together today!

Now, I'm into rock and heavy metal music as you know. There is a sub-culture of that called "emo" (usually used a put-down). It used to apply to people who were overly sensitive, emotional, and full of angst over the smallest things and adopted a certain style characterized by dyed black hair, tight t-shirts and skinny jeans.

And then you turn into Roddy & I – one who listens to AC/DC while cooking and one who wants Iron Maiden's "Holy Smoke" played at their funeral!

The music is a style of rock music resembling punk but having more complex arrangements and lyrics that deal with more emotional subjects.

This could all be summed up with the lyrics from Blink 182 "I Miss You":

*I need somebody and always
This sick, strange darkness
Comes creeping on, so haunting every time...
Like [the] indecision to call you
And hear your voice of treason
Will you come home and stop this pain tonight?*

I tell you this, because there is a danger that we could think that is what we mean when we talk about lament. Something trite or overblown. That is not what Christians mean when we are lamenting.

Lamenting is a little used words now. I am sure you can think of some synonyms and other expressions that are more commonly used! However, it is a useful word that captures a deep feeling that can affect any of us in our lives. Here are just a few examples from Google.

1. a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. Example: "his mother's night-long laments for his father"
2. a complaint. Example: "there were constant laments about the conditions of employment"
3. express passionate grief about. Example: "he was lamenting the death of his infant daughter"
4. express regret or disappointment about something. Example: "she lamented the lack of shops in the town"

Roddy said this more clearly last week than I did in the first session that the psalms run the gamut of human emotions.

As you may know, one of my favourite verses in the Bible is where Jesus says: I came so that they may have life, and life in all it's fullness.

I believe that a full life does not just means a happy life. It means a Christ-centred life, aiming to become deep people, focussed on God and our neighbours.

St Paul picks this strange mixture up when he talks about Christians as having 'treasure in clay jars' (2 Corinthians 4. 5-18):

"we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body."

He goes on to say in verse 16 & 18:

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day”... “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”.

It is this that I often reflect on at funerals – probably the easiest place to think of where people are sad, downcast and lamenting. I often remind people of the words of St Julian of Norwich (1343-c. 1416):

“He [Jesus] said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.’”

Which is what we are looking at today – even when we have those times when we feel desolate and abandoned. Psalms of Lament: words and song to help us, provide comfort, sympathy and encouragement when things look bleak, impossible or we just want a good shout at the world and God. All of these are in the psalms.

We are in good company too. Jesus himself lamented. On the cross, according to the Gospel of Matthew, he used the words of psalm 22:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

These are strong words. And, I think – if we are truthful – that many of us have thought something along those lines too. Something far removed from the teenage angst I mentioned at the start – as hard to navigate at that time of our lives though it is!

I have certainly had times in ministry where I have felt under pressure, overwhelmed, and despondent. Psalm 22 has re-assured me that others have been there too. It's words continue:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

***Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?***

***My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.***

***Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.***

***In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.***

***To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.***

***But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.***

***“He trusts in the Lord,” they say,
“let the Lord rescue him.***

Let him deliver him since he delights in him.”

***Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.***

***From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.***

***Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.***

***Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.***

***Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.***

***I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.***

***My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.***

***My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.***

***Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.***

***All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.***

***But you, Lord, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to
help me.
Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the
dogs.
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild
oxen.***

***I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.
You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor
him!
Revere him, all you descendants of
Israel!
For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.
From you comes the theme of my praise
in the great assembly; before those who
fear you I will fulfil my vows.***

***The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise
him—
may your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.***

***All the rich of the earth will feast and
worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel
before him—
those who cannot keep themselves
alive.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the
Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!***

A few years ago, there was a realisation that our worship – especially modern worship music – was geared towards upbeat. Nothing wrong with that. But, the thinking went, how do we worship (connect with God) when things are going badly?

Do you remember in the first session – when I asked you what you thought of the psalmist after reading psalm 1; you thought he was a bit of a self-righteous so-and-so?

With these psalms, we see the poet explore his inner heart, mind and soul, and so you might see some character development away from the person who arbitrarily divides the world into good & bad.

Have a think about the experiences you have had and that all people have had.

What words would you have prayed, or wanted to say when you were sick? When we are discouraged, disgruntled, disenchanting, diseased, and dispirited? Perhaps psalm 42. 1-5:

***As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.***

**Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.**

Perhaps when we have been unjustly accused of something, gossiped about, or misunderstood?
Psalm 109. 1-5.

**Be not silent, O God of my praise!
For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,
speaking against me with lying tongues.
They beset me with words of hate,
and attack me without cause.
In return for my love they accuse me,
even as I make prayer for them.
So they reward me evil for good,
and hatred for my love.**

When we know we have hurt others in thought, word or deed; and don't know how to make it right?

Psalm 51: 3-4:

**I know my transgressions, and my sin is every before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.**

Even when we feel like asking for revenge and retribution. This from psalm 137: 1, 8-9 – from the Israelites in exile in Bablyon.

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion....
Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.**

Even today, But Psalm 66 & Psalm 107 are still recommended scripture for naval chaplains for after storms:

Psalm 107: 23-27:

**Some went out on the sea in ships;
they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the Lord,
his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up a tempest
that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;
in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunkards;
they were at their wits' end.**

In 'vicar school' (Cranmer Hall, Durham for me), we used these verses as a joke before the annual raft-race over the river held between students and staff at St John's College. Needless to say, we had a procession with incense and singing the 'spiritual' hymns more akin to a football ground (you're not very good and you know you are, etc.).

For church leaders, recently and throughout the centuries, it led to the renewed question: How do we lead our people when bad things happen?

The answers were largely found in the psalms, and in a renewed discovery of the importance of lamenting together – acknowledging the pain, hurt and grief of a community. In the Church of England, this often happens when something awful happens in our communities. Remember those vigils in memory of Sarah Everard in London, Olivia Pratt-Korbel in Liverpool, and Elle Edwards on the Wirral in the Lighthouse pub to name a few.

In a less intense way, it was what we did when we had our covid memorial service and service upon the death of Queen Elizabeth, with church open for public mourning. Even during covid, when only 30 people were allowed to funerals, we tried to help people express those deep emotions together by giving out prayers in our weekly packs to be said together, by the online candle being lit through the Church of England website, or gathering outside (when we were allowed) in the church car-park to share memories and pray together.

That was extraordinary times, but we use psalms of lament in our worship each year – to remember the sufferings of Jesus. You may be familiar with marking yourself with ashes on Ash Wednesday, or coming to a Stations of the Cross or Good Friday service, or an All Souls service – these things all have an element of lament in them.

One that you may be most familiar with is the psalms the congregation says as the altar is stripped back to empty on Maundy Thursday:

Psalm 22 (which we have read)

Psalm 88:

**Lord, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.
May my prayer come before you; turn your
ear to my cry.
I am overwhelmed with troubles and my
life draws near to death.
I am counted among those who go down
to the pit; I am like one without strength.
I am set apart with the dead, like the slain
who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.
You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.
Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have
overwhelmed me with all your waves.
You have taken from me my closest
friends and have made me repulsive to
them.
I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes
are dim with grief.
I call to you, Lord, every day;**

**I spread out my hands to you.
Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?
Are your wonders known in the place of
darkness, or your righteous deeds in the
land of oblivion?
But I cry to you for help, Lord; in the
morning my prayer comes before you.
Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your
face from me?
From my youth I have suffered and been
close to death; I have borne your terrors
and am in despair.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
You have taken from me friend and
neighbour—
darkness is my closest friend.**

These next verses are from the Book of Lamentations – written when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC:

I wonder if we could say them together as a group – as we will in Maundy Thursday in just over 3 week's time. As you do so, perhaps think about how it would feel to say these words if you were leaving your hometown in Ukraine, or Syria, or if you were a displaced Palestinian or Jewish person seeking an uncontested homeland. Have a think what these would mean to you if you were a Christian refugee or asylum seeker today:

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!

How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her.

All Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.

The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan;
her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.
Her children have gone away, captives before the foe.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.

All Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.

From on high he sent fire; it went deep into my bones;
he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back;
he has left me stunned, faint all day long.
For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage;
my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed.

All Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.

All who pass along the way clap their hands at you;

they hiss and wag their heads at daughter Jerusalem;

'Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?'

The thought of my affliction and homelessness is wormwood and gall.

All Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul,

'therefore I will hope in him.'

The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

All Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. For the Lord will not reject for ever.

All Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.

I am going to play you a song now – a psalm of lament – but as a time to absorb and think through our time together today – and then I've got an activity for you!

Play: Mike Janzen, *The Psalms Project* "When I Kept Silent" (Psalm 38)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHm-uV-6jJc>)

Exercise:

Last week, Roddy brought an example of a psalm book with illustrations that could inspire us like the psalmist.

We've had a session with some heavy themes today – so I thought I would give each of you the chance to write your own psalm-prayers now.

(If you would like to do this at home: please find the example psalms and a blank page at the end of this download).

There are some examples of prayers or psalm verses of various moods for you to choose from for inspiration.

There are pens, pencils, paper on the table there too.

I will give you 10 minutes with some music on, and then we can come back together for a prayer – and you can share your own psalms if you want to (but no obligation or pressure!).

I will also give you the notes ahead of next week's final session of our series with Rev Sue on psalms of thanksgiving.

Ending prayer – psalm 51 & 143 (adapted). (From *Michael Perry, Bible Prayers for Worship*, p. 87).

O Lord, I spread out my hands to you. **I thirst for you like dry ground.**

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God: **let your good Spirit lead me in safety.**

You require sincerity and truth in me: **fill my mind with wisdom.**

Create in me a clean heart, O God: **and renew a faithful spirit within me.**

Do not cast me out from your presence: **or take your holy spirit from me.**

Give me again the joy of your salvation: **and make me willing to obey.**

Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever. Amen.

Exercise: Example psalms

Psalm 19.1: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Psalm 19. 11: The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

Psalm 34. 18: The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 46. 10: He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

Psalm 55. 2: Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.

Psalm 119. 28: My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

Psalm 119. 105: Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Psalm 127. 1: Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

Psalm 139. 1: You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

Psalm 139. 23: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

Psalm 147. 3: He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalm 3. 5: I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.

Psalm 4. 4: Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Psalm 4. 7: Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.

Psalm 3.3: But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

Psalm 3. 7: Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.

Psalm 121. 8: the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Psalm 27. 12: Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations.

Psalm 27. 13: I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

Psalm 34. 18: The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

My psalm

(of lament, of worship, of thanksgiving, of _____)

Perhaps you might like to set it to music?

Think of a tune and fit the words around – then find an instrumental version of your song and sing it as a prayer!