

## **Reflection for Sunday 29th May 2022 by Megan Cambridge**

'We step into this world with a cry. Although none of us remembers the moment, the first sound we uttered after leaving the warm and protected confines of our mother's womb was a loud protest. We enter, wailing. To cry is human.' Mark Vroegop American Pastor and writer

We don't stop crying after birth. It continues because our world is broken. While tears and sorrow are part of our humanity, there is an often-neglected prayer language in the Bible for our travels through a broken world: **lament**. This morning we are immersed in the Liturgy of Lament. Lament is not the same as crying, however, it is different. It is the prayer of God's people and it is a Christian response. Lament is different than crying because lament is a form of prayer. It is more than just the expression of sorrow or the venting of emotion. Lament talks to God about pain. It has a unique purpose, that of trust. It is a divinely-given invitation to pour out our fears, frustrations, and sorrows for the purpose of helping us to renew our confidence in God.

We see many examples of Lament in the Bible. Over a third of the Psalms are laments and there is a whole Old Testament book, the book of Lamentations, which weeps over the destruction of Jerusalem. In our Liturgy this morning Peter prayed the passage from Lamentations 5. After the siege and subsequent fall of Jerusalem it seemed to Jerusalem's inhabitants that the Lord had forgotten them (Lam 5:20) and would remain angry forever (Lam 5:22). They had experienced years of starvation, fear, violence, the destruction of their home, political grief and spiritual agony. Their experience was the judgement of God and was experienced by them as the punishment and abandonment of them by God. It can be hard for us as people of faith to admit wrestling with the same questions, because such honesty can be frightening and threatening to our belief. Yet in the Bible we see completely realistic portrayals of the human condition including, fear, anger, doubt and rejection. Far from being irrelevant, the Bible illumines the human heart as no other book can. We should be encouraged by that. Think about the vacillations in that passage in the Prayer of Lament. After a wonderful affirmation of God's sovereignty (Lam 5:19), the cruelties of conquest and exile made the people doubt the Lord's loyal love. To their accusations of forgetfulness, they added abandonment. Then we see the fear of being forsaken leading to an amazing prayer for restoration in verse 21. One scholar summarizes this prayer as follows: "The only hope for the people is that God Himself will enable them to do what they cannot do by themselves..." **"Laments turn toward God when sorrow tempts you to run from him."** Mark Vroegop

Lament is the prayer language for God's people as they live in a broken world. It is how we talk to God about our sorrows as we renew our hope in his sovereign care. **'To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.'** Mark Vroegop

The reason Lament is so different to crying is that Lament takes faith. Talking to God requires biblical conviction. Laying out the messy struggles of our souls and then asking again and again for God to help us requires a solid theological mooring. Laments interpret the world through a biblical lens. As Christians we lament because we know the 'long arc of God's plan: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration'. It's that 'long arc of God's plan' we read about in Revelation; the ending of all laments:

**'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4)'**

There are 4 elements to a Lament; turning to God, bringing your complaint, asking boldly, and choosing to trust. Look at Job, at the psalms (like psalm 31) or at Lamentations and you will see that pattern.

The lectionary readings for this Sunday testify variously to trust and hope in God's sovereignty, particularly in circumstances in which God's rule may be in doubt. Beaten severely and shackled in the innermost cell Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God in the darkness. The concluding verses of Revelation urge the faithful to persevere in the midst of crisis, trauma and oppression by Rome.

Here in our psalm for today psalm 97 the psalmist declares that 'Our God reigns' and urges us to 'Rejoice'. Whilst our Psalm this morning is not one of Lament it does speak to the power of God as King of the universe to control the natural elements using them to mystify and also to destroy. It is an expression of

faith in God, His righteousness and justice. It is perhaps an antidote to Lament. If the week has been difficult then there is renewal to be found in the forceful, powerful decrees of Psalm 97 'The Lord is King! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands (far away places) be glad!' Psalm 97 is a psalm of proclamation – bring on the trumpets and cymbals. Sometimes in the midst of sorrow or simply the emptiness of being becalmed and listless, a good dose of the energy of God's power and might may provide some healing and rejuvenation. Certainly its assertiveness and positivity could be a tonic to drooping spirits who are flagging in their enthusiasm for life and faith.

There are challenging and paradoxical images of God too. Perhaps more so as we read this psalm today in the short time between Ascension and Pentecost – a time when perhaps we associate with the disciples' feelings of absence of God's Presence. Between the departure of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit is another period of waiting for God to be revealed in new ways. It's a time that encourages the telling of experiences of the absence and elusive mystery of God. For those who find it hard to talk about God, hard to pray to God, hard to grasp and sustain a faithful relationship with a God who keeps coming in and out of focus Psalm 97 might just offer ways to do so.

In the view of Psalm 97 even while God's lightning lights up the whole sky one lighted candle held by one faithful soul has the power to make all the difference in the world – however much the hand holding it may tremble. The psalmist doesn't deny that the risk of faithfulness but meets it with the reassurance that God guards and rescues the faithful.

As we read psalm 97 this Sunday in the Easter season, we testify, as generations have before us that even when circumstances in the world suggest God does not reign – warfare and violence, poverty, oppression, devastation of the environment – we believe that God most certainly does and that God's sovereign power is evident once again in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As Martin Luther King Jr stated so eloquently 'there is a creative force in the universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realise that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.'



Our God is so faithful and loving and graceful that Jesus came to be amongst us to experience all the worse that we can experience and to understand what that is like. Jesus was mocked, rejected, betrayed, falsely accused and violently put to death to save us. He wept over the loss of His friend and over Jerusalem and He too felt the separation from God in His last moments on the cross. Whatever we bring in our Lament He has been there before us and when we Lament He can say 'me too'.

Rembrandt: Jeremiah Lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem. 1630  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands