

## Singing the Blues

### Week 5

Welcome to our series of services focusing on lament. These services are inspired by the Psalms of lament in the Bible and by the Blues music of the USA and beyond.

Lament is a vital but often ignored or dismissed part of spiritual life. It is the grit in the oyster that enables the true treasure to grow.

It enables us to approach God honestly rather than attempting to hide or deny the things that trouble us.

It enables us to change and grow as God's people and to challenge and work for the world to grow as God's kingdom.

It enables us to praise God with open and honest lips rather than gritted and resentful teeth.

Walter Brueggemann calls Psalms of Lament Psalms of Disorientation because they arise from times when we no longer feel at home in our world or our lives, when we feel alienated from ourselves, others and God. This disorientation causes us to look realistically at how we and the world are, to mourn all that is wrong and to wonder if God is present. We then place this mourning inside God's Word which shows a God who also mourns. This enables and assurance of God's presence which causes us to move to thanksgiving and praise while still acknowledging our grief. It also inspires us to work to transform the world to God's Kingdom

And so we find ourselves at home once more - not the same as the home we left but a new home and we to are not the same but 'changed from glory into glory'.

And so in this new home we feel that grit once more, as we are faced with fresh needs for lament and all begins again...

Call to worship

**We come to worship God,**  
in the busyness of our lives  
and in the stillness of this place,

**We come to worship God**  
bringing all that we are  
the joys and sorrows of our lives

**We come to worship God,**  
in the reality of our lives and our world  
our grief and anger  
our longings for change and healing  
bringing the things that burden and overwhelm us

**We come to worship God,**  
with our hopes that things can be different,  
and our knowledge of the love of God  
present even when silent and unnoticed

**In all that we are,  
because of all that God is  
let us worship.**

**Hymn 465 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah**

Introduction

Lament is one of the central movements of the Spirit. It connects the realities of this world and our lives with the life of God within them and beyond them. It grieves those things which separate us, others and the world from abundant and full life in God.

In these services we will be following the rhythm and pattern of lament by starting our services with an opportunity to name those situations we are grieving and praying about, the things that need healing and change. The service will move through our hearing and meditating on God's Word. Then, as many of the Psalms of Lament, we move from lament and petition to confession, thanksgiving, praise and commitment.

As having a familiar structure and rhythm gives us a sense of security which enables lament, the liturgy in the services is the same, hopefully enabling our engagement to deepen over the weeks.

### Prayer of Lament

So we remember this week.

Take a moment to think of  
those things that have grieved or angered you this week  
the items on the news that have led you to long for a better world

Write one grief on each post it note and hold them as we pray. There will be a chance later in the service to add to them and to place them on the 'Wailing Wall'

*a time of quiet for all to write*

So let us pray,  
We acknowledge and recall the griefs we bear, their weight and the times when they have seemed to heavy to carry

God, who in Jesus wept for Lazarus and grieved over Jerusalem,  
give us the courage and strength to sit in our grief  
and the assurance that you weep with us.

We acknowledge and recall the times when we have been hurt, our resentments and our need for healing

God, who in Jesus stood with the woman caught in adultery,  
give us the honesty to acknowledge our hurt and resentment and the hurt and resentment we have caused in others  
and the strength and grace to accept your healing

We acknowledge and recall the anger we have felt at a world that is not as it should be, our rage over injustice

God, who in Jesus raged at the state of the Temple and turned over the tables,  
give us the wisdom to know when our anger is just  
and the vision to allow it to move us to transform the world to your kingdom.

We remember too those times when we have been aware of your presence in a story on the news or the action of a neighbour, in a word of scripture or a moment of stillness.

God who in Jesus called us to life in all its fullness  
give us a knowledge of your presence  
in our griefs and our joys,  
our struggles and our times of peace  
our worship in this place and throughout our daily lives  
**Amen**

### **Hymn 643 When our confidence is shaken**

Psalm 102 Prayer to the Eternal King for Help  
A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the Lord.

1

Hear my prayer, O Lord;  
    let my cry come to you.

2

Do not hide your face from me  
    on the day of my distress.  
Incline your ear to me;  
    answer me speedily on the day when I call.

3

For my days pass away like smoke,  
    and my bones burn like a furnace.

4

My heart is stricken and withered like grass;  
    I am too wasted to eat my bread.

5

Because of my loud groaning  
    my bones cling to my skin.

6

I am like an owl of the wilderness,  
    like a little owl of the waste places.

7

I lie awake;  
    I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

8

All day long my enemies taunt me;  
    those who deride me use my name for a curse.

9

For I eat ashes like bread,  
    and mingle tears with my drink,  
10  
because of your indignation and anger;  
    for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.  
11  
My days are like an evening shadow;  
    I wither away like grass.  
12  
But you, O Lord, are enthroned for ever;  
    your name endures to all generations.  
13  
You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,  
    for it is time to favour it;  
    the appointed time has come.  
14  
For your servants hold its stones dear,  
    and have pity on its dust.  
15  
The nations will fear the name of the Lord,  
    and all the kings of the earth your glory.  
16  
For the Lord will build up Zion;  
    he will appear in his glory.  
17  
He will regard the prayer of the destitute,  
    and will not despise their prayer.  
18  
Let this be recorded for a generation to come,  
    so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:  
19  
that he looked down from his holy height,  
    from heaven the Lord looked at the earth,  
20  
to hear the groans of the prisoners,  
    to set free those who were doomed to die;  
21  
so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion,  
    and his praise in Jerusalem,  
22  
when peoples gather together,  
    and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.

23

He has broken my strength in mid-course;  
    he has shortened my days.

24

'O my God,' I say, 'do not take me away  
    at the mid-point of my life,  
you whose years endure  
    throughout all generations.'

25

Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,  
    and the heavens are the work of your hands.

26

They will perish, but you endure;  
    they will all wear out like a garment.

You change them like clothing, and they pass away;

27

    but you are the same, and your years have no end.

28

The children of your servants shall live secure;  
    their offspring shall be established in your presence.

Sermon/Meditation: My days are like an evening shadow;  
I wither away like grass.

There was a story in the media recently mourning the fact that the first bramley apple tree, from which all others have been grown, is dying. The tree, which was planted over 200 years ago, has a fungal infection which is gradually killing it. A scientist who has studied the tree has said

"Even if it is dying - we all want to die with dignity. It needs to be nursed in its terminal years."

and the landowner has talked of his wishes to preserve the tree

"It's all very sad. The tree has honey fungus and I have asked everybody if there is a treatment. All the advice seems to be that it is fatal," he said.

"In the long term once it has died, I would like to preserve the tree where it stands for as long as possible."

Throughout the article there echoed a longing that this death could be prevented, a desire to hang on to the much loved tree even after it has died, and maybe a denial that death was inevitable.

So why start a sermon on psalm 102 with a story of a dying tree?

The answer comes in those wishes and responses to the likelihood of its death:

a wish to prevent it  
a desire to hang on to something or someone much loved after death  
a denial that death is inevitable

Psalm 102 resounds with feelings of sorrow at the passing of days and the changing and reduction of abilities and strength.

For my days pass away like smoke,  
and my bones burn like a furnace.

I wonder if those feelings resonate with you. If you too feel days rushing by or notice the signs of aging. If the changes you notice lead you to grieve for days past and long for how to be the way you were years ago. If you look at pictures of the past and wonder where that young man or woman went.

Maya Angelou puts it like this

### Remembering

Soft grey ghosts crawl up my sleeve  
to peer into my eyes  
while I within deny their threats  
and answer them with lies.

Mushlike memories perform  
a ritual on my lips  
I lie in stolid hopelessness  
and they lay my soul in strips.

If we don't recognise and mourn the change and move on to the next stage of life, we can find ourselves continually struggling to live in the same way as we have done. This stops us from finding new ways to serve but it also prevents the generations below us from growing into their places.

This is true of people but also of churches. There was once a church with a great steward who did everything: he washed and ironed the communion cloths, made the tea, set out the church for worship, cooked for the lunch club and so much more besides. As he got older, he wouldn't slow down. Others tried to help. Younger people tried to take roles in the church but they would never do it properly. They always wanted change. Held frozen in time the man and the church aged. Then suddenly the steward died on the day before the lunch club he should have cooked. The church mourned, their grief was immense. They didn't know what to do. And then, slowly, like a garden after a long hard winter, fresh shoots began to emerge. People began to take on

roles. Jobs got done, differently than before. The church came back to life with fresh generations and new voices.

There's an old cliche that there's nothing sure except death and taxes. These days it appears that for a certain section of society and certain companies even taxes aren't all that certain so death remains the one certainty. The fact that our time on earth is limited, that our days come to an end is part of what makes us human, one of the experiences shared by all people. And yet its a subject we rarely talk about, that at times seems taboo.

There was a young mother dying of cancer. She had two young children. The family faced her illness together with the support of the church. Unfortunately, the young minister of the church was unable to face the thought that she might die and so each time he visited, right up until the day she died, he prayed for a miracle, for her to be completely healed of the cancer. Following her death her family spoke of how they felt that they had been deprived of the chance to say goodbye fully because of the minister's words.

Prayer for healing is important but often for healing to come we need to be willing to accept the reality of the situation and to allow God to heal in God's way. Think of Jesus at Lazarus's tomb mourning his death before life could return. Or think of Jesus's crucifixion and the need for us to face the reality of death for life to come.

In contrast, a teacher at a religious education training course once spoke movingly about how her husband had died when her children were young. She said that, although the children's school had been wonderful and supportive, the children still felt uncomfortable talking about their dad's death there. She thought that it was because death had never been talked of before. She urged all the teachers present to read their classes stories that involved death, to use the word, to talk about it with the children, so that the children would know that it was OK to talk about and would have the words and the emotional vocabulary to do so.

This mourning of the past helps us to accept and to enjoy how we are in the present: the next part of the apple tree story is that the scientist, having faced the reality that the original tree would die, produced clones of it, all of which seem stronger than the original tree.

In the psalm we see that having mourned his own raging the writer finds comfort and strength in an everlasting and ever-present God

But you, O Lord, are enthroned for ever;  
your name endures to all generations.

And from finding that comfort he then has the strength to let go and allow future generations to take over

Let this be recorded for a generation to come,  
so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:  
that he looked down from his holy height,  
from heaven the Lord looked at the earth,  
to hear the groans of the prisoners,  
to set free those who were doomed to die;  
so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion,  
and his praise in Jerusalem,

Bramley trees or human bodies - we all have a finite life span and we all age  
Our days are like an evening shadow;

I wither away like grass  
How do we enable ourselves to mourn days past so that we may enjoy the present?

How do we enable ourselves and each other to talk about death together? To express our fears and our longings so that we may be more fully alive? So that we may say our good byes and know that we mourn and face fresh beginnings fully alive in the present?

*Introduction to the Song:*

Blind Willie Johnson, Jesus make up my dying bed

'Jesus make up my dyin' bed' is a traditional song that has been recorded by numerous musicians. The song words refer to a person on his deathbed identifying with Jesus' pain on the cross, and calling to Jesus to ease his passage. They were inspired by Psalm 41:3 'The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing, thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness'.

Johnson, a lifelong preacher, died of malarial fever in 1945 in the wet ruins of his burnt down Texas house and church. It is reported that he was denied access to the hospital because he was black.

Although the exact story is unclear, one of Johnson's widows said his mother had blinded him as a child with lye soap to get back at his father; Johnson's father would often leave him on street corners to sing for money. Tradition has it that he was arrested for nearly starting a riot at a courthouse with a

powerful rendition of 'If I had my way I'd tear this building down,' a song about Sampson and Delilah. According to his biographer Samuel Charters, however, he was arrested while singing for tips in front of the Customs House by a police officer who misconstrued the title lyric and mistook it for incitement.

Blind Willie Johnson, Jesus make up my dying bed

Since me and Jesus got: married

Haven't been a minute apart

With the receiver in my hand

And re-ligion in my heart.

I can ring 'im up easy

Ahhhhh

Oh well

Ring 'im up easy

Go make up my

Mmmmm

Weeping that he ain't: lost

They despised the Amen

Hanging on the Cross

Hanging there in misery

Ahhhhhhh

Oh well

Hanging there in misery

Go make up my

Mmmmmmmmm

Mmmmmmm mmmmm

Jesus gon' make up my

They despised the: Amen

Made poor Martha moan

Jesus said to his de-ciples

Come and carry my mother along

Dying will be easy

Ahhhhhhhhh

Dying will be easy

Dying will be easy

Jesus gon make up my

I'm dead and: buried

Somebody said that I was lost

When it get down to Jordan

Have to bear my body across

Done gone over

Ahhhhhhh  
Oh well  
Done gone over  
Make up my...

As you listen to the song, you may wish to look at the things you wrote at the beginning of the service, to think of the loads you carry, the injustices and griefs of the world that long for change and healing

When you're ready come and place your laments on the wailing wall trusting that God grieves with us

*the song is played*

Prayer:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

We bring these griefs and the griefs we have no words to express

Lord hear our prayers

**And let our cry come to you**

We bring our lives

the times when we have doubted or been unable to feel your presence,  
our regrets for times when we have separated ourselves from you and each other,

our worries for what is to come

We pray for healing and forgiveness

Lord hear our prayers

**And let our cry come to you**

Lord you give us our lives

create us in your image

call us your children

give us times of joy when we have been surrounded by love in family and friends,

times of stillness when we have known you near us

We praise and thank you for your love which has followed us all the days of our lives

Lord make us aware of your presence

**And may your cry come to us**

We bring you the life of your church

the times when we have lost our way and longed for clear vision,  
our regrets for times when our image of your love has been too narrow and  
the damage that has done to ourselves and others

our worries for what is to come

We pray for healing and forgiveness

Lord hear our prayers

**And let our cry come to you**

Lord you give us your church

a people made for your praise and glory  
to share your Word and work for your kingdom

give us times when we have celebrated your presence and shown your love  
to others,

We praise and thank you for your love which has followed us all the days of  
our lives

Lord make us aware of your presence

**And may your cry come to us**

We bring you the life of your world

the places where oppression and violence seem to hold the upper hand

homes destroyed by war, violence, abuse or poverty

our regrets for our misuse of the world and its resources

our worries for what is to come

We pray for healing and forgiveness

Lord hear our prayers

**And let our cry come to you**

Lord, you give us the life of your world,

created a place of wonder, beauty and diversity

inspire people to work for justice and peace

you empower us and our leaders to work for the good of all

We praise and thank you for your love which has followed us all the days of our lives

Lord make us aware of your presence

**And may your cry come to us**

Loving God,  
Known and unknown  
felt and unfelt  
We bring you these prayers  
in the name of Jesus  
who knew you close and cried at your absence  
**Amen**

We say together the Lord's Prayer in whichever language or form we know it best.

**Hymn 480/481 The Lord's my shepherd**

Offering

**Hymn 79 I'll praise my maker while I've breath**

Declaration of God's Presence, Blessing and Sending Out

God is with us  
in this place and in every place  
in this time and in every time

God is with us  
when we feel God's presence  
and when we feel God's absence

God will be with us  
in all that we face  
in our joys and our sorrows  
our times of ease and our times of struggle  
so let us praise God

**Alleluia**

Know that you go with the blessing of God, Eternal, Son and Spirit

Know that you are surrounded and filled by the love of God, Eternal, Son and Spirit

Know that you are called to live as people of God, Eternal, Son and Spirit

Go in peace and praise to live and work to God's praise and glory  
to weep with those who are weeping  
to dance with those who are dancing  
to look for God's kingdom wherever you are  
to create God's kingdom wherever you go  
to show God's love to all you meet  
to know God's love in all you meet

**Thanks be to God. Amen**