

Singing the Blues Week 6

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 an 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 too 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.**

As your family, Lord, see us here (StF 571)

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

Just as I am, without one plea (StF 556)

Psalm 77 God's Mighty Deeds Recalled

To the leader: according to Jeduthun. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

1

I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.

2

In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.

3

I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.

4

You keep my eyelids from closing;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

5

I consider the days of old,
and remember the years of long ago.

6

I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit:

7

'Will the Lord spurn for ever,
and never again be favourable?

8

Has his steadfast love ceased for ever?
Are his promises at an end for all time?

9

Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?'

10

And I say, 'It is my grief
that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'

11

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.

12

I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.

13

Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?

14

You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.

15

With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

16

When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
the very deep trembled.

17

The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.

18

The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.

19

Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.

20

You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Sermon/Meditation: Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Nobody knows you when you're down and out

So sings Bessy Smith in today's blues song. The song echoes the story of the Prodigal Son: the times of riches filled with fair weather friends who flock and gather at abundantly expressed generosity followed by the isolation of lean times, of friends falling away as poverty engulfs and generosity can no longer be shown.

Today's psalm echoes with the question "Has God forgotten to be gracious?"

It's a question that often resounds in us at times of tragedy. A question that has resounded in hearts and minds and on lips this summer as we have witnessed our inhumanity, hatred and violence in acts of racism, terrorism, and war and in the acts of individuals driven to violence by their own brokenness and the feelings of threat that engulfed them. Has God forgotten?

It's a daring question, whispered or shouted, that can feel as though it strikes at the very heart of our faith and yet that is present in the very heart of our scriptures.

From the people of God crying out in Egypt, through their hungry and thirst wanderings in the wilderness the question resounds. In the days of unjust kings, of military defeats and conquered oppression, in exile and homecoming the question

echoes. In the agonised musings of Job's collapsing life and in the words of Jesus on the cross the question shouts .

In an episode of NCIS one of the agents, an Israeli, sits in a synagogue. Her father has just been shot dead, her sister had died years before as a child, her brother and mother were also dead. She was now the last of her family. All the others having died violently. As she sits she speaks vehemently, in a voice that is little more than a whisper

“Why? Why should I not be angry? With all that has been taken? Why should I have faith in you? Show me a sign.

Show me a sign that I should not lose hope.”

She is a figure of isolation and loneliness. Her question showing a longing for a connection to a God she also feels is absent or unresponsive. Then, like Elijah wandering in the wilderness claiming that he is alone and that hope is gone, she is reminded of the presence of others: the door behind her opens, a colleague and friend walks in having gone to some trouble to track her down. He offers sympathy, strength, a place to stay but most of all his presence. Later another colleague will bake cookies, a sign of life amid all the tragedy and destruction. In their actions both colleagues offer love and presence. They stretch out their hand to reassure her that there is hope, that there are those who know her and care about her.

In his book 'God has a dream', Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes

“Dear child of God, it is often difficult for us to recognise the presence of God in our lives and in our world. In the clamour of the tragedy that fills our headlines we forget about the majesty that is present all around us. We feel vulnerable, for vulnerability is the essence of creature hood. But we are not helpless and with God's love we are ultimately invincible. Our God does not forget those who are suffering and oppressed.”

He goes on, writing about the struggle against apartheid

“Of course there were times when you had to whistle in the dark to keep your morale up, and you wanted to whisper in God's ear:

“God, we know You are in charge, but can't you make it a little more obvious?” God did make it more obvious to me once, during what we call the Feast of the Transfiguration. Apartheid was in full swing as I and other church leaders were preparing for a meeting with the prime minister to discuss many of the controversies that erupted in those days. We met at a theological college that had closed down because of the government's racist policies. During our discussions I went into the priory garden for some quiet. There was a huge Calvary - a large wooden cross without corpus, but with protruding nails and crown of thorns. It was a stark symbol of the Christian faith. It was winter: the grass was pale and dry and nobody would have believed that in a few weeks' time it would be lush and green and beautiful again. It would be transfigured.

As I sat quietly in the garden I realised the power of transfiguration - of God's transformation - in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our veld in winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry streams gurgle with swift-flowing water. When winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection.

The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one and no situation, is "untransfigurable," that the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will not be just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory."

At the heart of Ziva's question in NCIS, at the heart of the psalmist's question "Has God forgotten to be gracious?" is this longing for transformation, for transfiguration, to be able to see the world translucent, charged with God's glory. But also a question of how God would allow the suffering, the acts of hatred, all that mars and disfigures our life and our world. Can God truly be God if God allows things to be as they are? we ask.

Archbishop Tutu goes on

"God has given us space to be authentically human persons with autonomy....Because God takes the risk of real relationships, there is the possibility that those relationships are going to splinter, and they often do.

This autonomy is the basis of our freedom, without which no real relationship with God - or with each other - would be possible. God created us freely, for freedom. To be human in the understanding of the Bible is to be free to choose, free to choose to love or to hate, to be kind or to be cruel. ... That is how God created us. It is part of being created in the image of God, this freedom that can make us into glorious creatures or damn us into hellish ones. God took an incredible risk in creating us human beings. ...

It is this fact that we were created to be free that is the reason that all oppression must ultimately fail. ...

At times of despair, we must learn to see with new eyes like the prophet Elisha. The Bible tells us that Elisha and his servant were surrounded by a host of enemies. But the prophet remained strangely calm and somewhat unconcerned while his servant grew ever more agitated. The prophet asked God to open the servant's eyes and the servant then saw that those who were on their side were many times more than those against them. This is not just an old story. This is a way to see that you are not alone in your struggle for justice. There are many of you who are working to feed the orphan and the widow. There are many who are working to beat swords into plowshares. There is hope that nightmares will end, hope that seemingly intractable problems will find solutions. God has some tremendous fellow workers, some outstanding partners.

Each of us has a capacity for great evil but also for great good, and that is what convinces God that it is worth the risk of creating us. It is awesome that God the Omnipotent One depends on us fragile and vulnerable creatures to accomplish God's will and to bring justice and healing and wholeness...

I have often told the story of the rustic priest in Russia who was accosted by a brash young physicist who had rehearsed all the reasons for atheism and arrogantly concluded, "Therefore I do not believe in God." The little priest, not put off at all, replied quietly, "Oh, it doesn't matter. God believes in you."

And so with the psalmist, as we face the cruelties and tragedies that abound in this world we ask "Has God forgotten to be gracious?" and in response, as the psalmist does, we tell the stories of God's graciousness in times past, we read the scriptures to remind ourselves that God is gracious and loving and calls us to use our freedom to show God's love, to work as God's partners to create justice and freedom from oppression. We read the scriptures so that, with Elisha's servant, our eyes may be opened to see the many others who join in that work and the places where seemingly dead trees are waiting to burst into leaf and the dry streams are ready to receive flowing and life giving water, where lives thirsty for God's abundant life may have their thirst quenched.

Introduction to the Song:

'Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out' is a blues standard written by Jimmy Cox in 1923. Its lyric, told from the point of view of a one-time millionaire during the prohibition era in the USA, reflects on the fleeting nature of material wealth and the friendships that come and go with it. It was popularized by Bessie Smith, one of the preeminent blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s. Since her 1929 recording, it has been interpreted by numerous musicians in a variety of styles. The song reflects on the reality that without money, a person is disadvantaged not just in what they cannot buy and have, but by alienation - the lack of help and support from informal support networks of friends and families. So with money, a person has an extra step up and many things get easier: a poorer person has more than just lack of funds as an obstacle.

Bessie Smith, Nobody knows you when you're down and out

Once I lived the life of a millionaire,
Spending my money, I didn't care
I carried my friends out for a good time,
Buying bootleg liquor, champagne and wine
Then I began to fall so low,
I didn't have a friend, and no place to go
So if I ever get my hand on a dollar again,
I'm gonna hold on to it till them eagle's grin
Nobody knows you when you down and out
In my pocket not one penny,
And my friends I haven't any

But If I ever get on my feet again,
Then I'll meet my long lost friend
It's mighty strange, without a doubt
Nobody knows you when you down and out
I mean when you down and out
Mmmmm, when you're down and out,
Mmmmm, not one penny
And my friends I haven't any,
Mmmmm, well I felt so low
Nobody wants me round their door,
Mmmmm, without a doubt,
No man can use you wen you down and out
I mean when you down and out

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.

Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred? (StF 662)

Offering

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father (StF 51)

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**