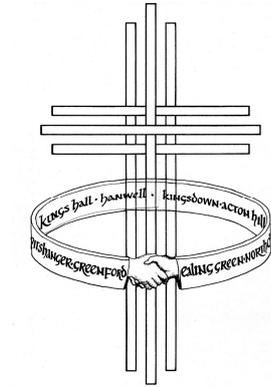


The Methodist Church  
**Ealing Trinity Circuit**



*Singing the  
Blues*

*Psalms of Lament*

**Sermons from the  
Summer Service Series 2016**

## Introduction

This booklet contains the sermons from Ealing Trinity's series of services 'Singing the Blues' which focussed on 'lament'. These services were 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...

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## **The blues songs linked to each of these sermons**

1. Backlash Blues	<i>Nina Simone</i>
2. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child	<i>Paul Robeson</i>
3. Didn't it rain	<i>Sister Rosetta Tharpe</i>
4. The Waters of Babylon	<i>Philip Hayes (1786) sung by Don Mclean</i>
5. Jesus make up my dying bed	<i>Blind Willie Johnson</i>
6. Nobody knows you when you're down and out	<i>Jimmy Cox</i>

# 1. Crying the Blues

Based on Psalms 42 and 43

Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?  
Why are you crying the blues?  
Fix my eyes on God.

*(Eugene Peterson, The Message)*

A testimony....

“It was 3 months into sick leave and the depression, prompted by my physical illness, had settled round me like a thick, pea-soup fog making everything mustard/sepia-coloured, tasteless, smell-less and with edges so blurred and vague that things seemed to have no real form or shape. Food tasted like dust and the sun didn’t seem to warm my skin.

The physical illness had made walking even the shortest distance feel like one of those nightmares where the road gets longer and your legs carry you nowhere. Now the depression made time feel the same way: minutes could seem like hours but also hours could disappear in what felt like an instant. The despair of being stuck in this place where there was no fresh air for body, soul or psyche was overwhelming and engulfing.

Friends voices echoed, muffled through the fog calling me back to life, urging prayer and trust in God but God was absent and silent, unable or unwilling to enter the depths. Like the psalmist, I tried to hold fast to the memory, the wispy haze of God once present. I struggled to church and sat, muffled, isolated, unknown and unknowable, longing for word, bread and wine to touch me, to hold me, to draw me into life.

Into the middle of this void came an image: one Sunday a reading of the prodigal son connected and I vividly entered the story. I became the son on the road at the outskirts of my father’s property. In front of me was a huge brick wall which seemed to grow as I approached. In the distance I could see a window in the house lit brightly and in it the silhouette of a figure, my father. As I looked at the figure I immediately assumed his back was to the window, looking away from me, not wanting to know.

Then, over days and weeks living with the image, I realised that I could not tell whether the figure was looking out expectantly or looking in and ignoring me. Looking back, it seems to me that this was the point that the fog began to shift. The change was almost imperceptible and unbelievably fragile at first - just the tiny glimmer of a possibility. It was as if the memory of life entered as I realised the father might be looking at me, looking out for me.”

Marva J Dawn sums up the experience of many including the writer of this testimony which began this sermon in this way:

“The poet of Psalm 42 captures well the yearning and yawning vacuum we experience when we don’t know God’s presence. Not only do others say to us continually, “Where is your God?” but we wonder the same ourselves. Even if people say, “God is here with you,” we don’t feel any presence of Christ, any comfort of the Holy Spirit, any love of the Father. All we feel is emptiness, a silent void.

“The more our losses pile up, the more God seems absent. The more we struggle to find Him, the farther away He seems. We get caught up in a downward spiral of longing that receives no satisfaction, so the hunger becomes intensified, then the lack of an answer becomes all the more apparent, the yearning multiplies, and the vacuum expands immeasurably.”

Yet this intense yearning and absence is not the end. Psalms 42 and 43 describe vividly the image of this longing beginning with the parched dryness of land where even the last trickle of a stream has dried out so long ago that the ground has become like cracked concrete. As the psalms go on the images and the feelings intensify until we’re caught up and buffeted by the waves of the tsunami, the thunder of God’s cataracts.

But this absence is not the end of the story. Echoing through the psalm is the attempt to remember God’s presence. To hold on to what our testimony called ‘the wispy haze of God once present’. As we hear God’s word and allow God to hear our pain, complaint and anger we allow the possibility of healing and we allow God to be God full of love and power, a God who is big enough and strong enough to take our grief and our anger and to love and hold us in it.

And yet until recently lament has not been a feature of the church. Instead we have been encouraged to praise and to trust while anger, grief and feeling God absent have been discouraged and even at times thought of as sin. Bob Yoder talks of the church of his childhood this way:

“Growing up in church I do not remember singing “cries against God” or “prayers of protest to Jesus.” I was nurtured in a faith tradition that discouraged doubt in God. In fact, that would have been seen as a weakness in my faith. I was led to believe such feelings stemmed from some sort of sin in my life.”

So we have been encouraged to think of this part of ourselves as wrong but if we split ourselves and deny ourselves in this way we prevent ourselves from being truly ourselves and we stop God from being truly God and we stop the church from being truly church. We are in effect saying that we don't trust God with this part of ourselves. Where is good news and healing in the dry desert of a faith that jumps too rapidly to praise and that refuses to accept or show that there is anything that needs healing?

Brian Wren in writing about his hymn ‘Here hangs a man discarded’ says,  
“To anyone who really experiences life as empty and meaningless, the Church’s glad songs about Grace and Resurrection can be an alienation – to the person who sits bowed down in depression and emptiness, there is no good news in being invited to join the celebration next door. Good news may come, however, in the accepting silence of one who sits with the desolate, and in the story of the Messiah of God whose life was “emptied of all meaning, drained out in bleak distress” (v.4), when the sense of God’s purpose and presence was withdrawn from him at the greatest crisis of his life. This, for contemporary humanity, is part of the absurdity (folly) of the cross.”

Here is good news;

That God weeps with us  
knows our griefs

is the God who in Jesus screamed “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Here is healing;

that God offers life in all its fullness  
the joys and the sorrows  
that to be fully God’s people we must grieve,  
must long for a world complete in God’s love

Here is wholeness;

in knowing that the sun is there as we sit in the grief of not feeling its warmth  
in knowing that love is there even as we sit in the barrenness of not knowing it  
in knowing God is there even as we sit in the darkness sitting with us,  
yearning and grieving for us.

And so we finally come to true praise and trust in God. A praise born out of our griefs as well as our joys.

## 2. The Inescapable God

Based on Psalm 139

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

In the middle of a thunder storm in 'The Sound of Music' Maria sings,

“Whenever I feel afraid,  
I hold my head erect  
and whistle a happy tune  
so no-one will suspect  
I'm afraid.”

Faced with reality, at times when grief is raw, oppression feels overpowering and all feels lost, people have a tendency to wish to escape from reality. We tell stories of golden ages of the past that never really existed. We run directly to the false praise that seeks to hide ourselves from God. We dive into self-pity or seek a scapegoat so that we don't have to face the reality of who we are. We run, like Adam and Eve in Eden's garden, to hide ourselves in the bushes of self-deception and false cheerfulness, whistling happy tunes to stave off the fear and grief.

Like the Psalmist we wish to take the wings of the morning or dive to the depths to escape the feelings that overwhelm us. Maybe, also, we want to hide these feelings from ourselves, others and God because we feel they are unacceptable. Do we think that, somehow, our grief and anger is unacceptable to God? That God will be upset or unable to cope with it? That somehow it will anger God? Do we hide these feelings because, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we are ashamed of them?

Quite often when we do this we end up feeling self-pity instead of grief and we whinge instead of lament. So what's the difference between whinge and lament?

Imagine you're in a hole. When we whinge it's as if we're in a hole, deep and dark. We can't stand being in there and long to get out to the sunshine and friends but instead we keep digging, making the hole darker and darker. Whinging is addressed to ourselves and increases our isolation. Even if we whinge to a friend we expect them to join us in the whinge and not to help us out of it. It makes us certain that we're alone and even when we find a friend it tries hard to separate us from them and to increase our isolation. In fact, while we may whinge to friends, it's as if we want them to dig their own holes or shout to us from outside the hole rather than joining us in it. So whinging increases our isolation.

When we lament we're still in the hole. It's still dark and impenetrable. But now we've invited others into the hole with us and together we may think of a way out. And we've discovered that God is already in the depths waiting for us, longing to be with us.

Lament calls out to God and invites God in. It calls out to others and invites them to join us. Like the blues songs of America, like the protest songs of Soweto, like the songs of oppressed peoples everywhere, lament may start with a single voice but expects or longs to be joined by a choir both on earth and in heaven. So lament expects company, ends isolation and gathers a choir.

Whinging also blinds us to the reality of the situation. Our hole seems a warm, comforting, safe and secure palace. The world seems entirely at fault. All is wrong and must be escaped. Our isolation seems like martyrdom. And we are the hero of our story. As we whinge we can gaze into our mirror, like the wicked queen in Snow White, and see perfection. We blind ourselves to things that need to change in ourselves and the possibilities that surround us. Again we dig the hole deeper or merely sit enjoying it, blind to the harm it is doing, ignoring its reality.

When we sit in the hole lamenting, we can be honest about what the hole means to us. We can be honest about our wish for comfort, our longing for safety. But we also see the false safety of the hole: the walls that could fall upon us, the lack of food, our vulnerability to attack. We can also see ourselves honestly: we may still be the hero of the story, but we are a hero with faults whose actions may have helped create the hole. Our mirror shows us, not false perfection or an airbrushed picture, but that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. It causes us not to hide from God and others but to ask God to search us and know us and know if there is any wickedness in us. As we lament we look at the reality that surrounds us with honesty. We are not held fast by our own need to be the martyr or the hero, but can allow ourselves to be fully ourselves.

Whinging also makes us stay put. It stops us changing the situation. It gives us an image in our heads of ourselves as great martyrs who must endure this. Think about the last time you had a good whinge. Did anyone try to offer a solution or help? If so, how did you feel? You probably felt irritated or angry, and looked for reasons why their suggestions wouldn't possibly work. You may even have felt the need to whinge about their suggestion!

When we're sat in our hole whinging, actually we quite enjoy the hole! Although, if you dare to suggest such a thing from outside we'll get extremely angry and indignant about it and tell you that you don't understand! It's dark and surrounds us and holds us safe. It doesn't ask for action or require us to change. While we're alone in the hole, we can believe whatever we like and no one and nothing will challenge us. Because we quite like the hole, we don't try to find ways to escape it. So we don't notice the torch by our hand, let alone shine it along the walls and find the footholds or ladder that might be a way out. And if we saw the ladder, we'd probably assume it was a trap or broken - too dangerous to use!

As we sit in our hole lamenting with others, seeing the hole for what it is and acknowledging our fears and shortcomings, we begin to notice possibilities. Someone finds a torch and then the ladder. Others outside the hole hear the singing and are drawn to help. When we lament we do so recognising our needs and all that we are but also recognising the need for change. Lament is like the grit in the oyster. Lament gets our feet moving to its rhythm. Opens our eyes to what's wrong. It prompts change in ourselves and action in our world. It empowers rather than handicaps.

Whinging is seductive. It seems to offer an absence of painful feelings like fear, anger, and pain. It seems to show us an image of ourselves as self-sufficient hero and martyr battling on when no one understands. It leaves us sat in our hole with our dreams - dreams that cannot be destroyed, of a golden age that never was and never will be. But lament asks us to live in our feelings of pain and fear, to sing as Paul Robeson does in the song, 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. A long way from home.' It asks us to see ourselves as we are: wonderfully made but also capable of wrong. But most of all it asks us to join the choir or to begin a song and invite others to join in. Its rhythm sets our feet dancing, marching and stamping to change the world and end wrongs until we and all people can dance, march and stamp our way into God's kingdom where we need lament no more.

### 3. The Waters Have Entered my Soul

Based on Psalm 69

“O Lord save me for the waters have entered my soul.” So starts Psalm 69 in the King James Version of the Bible. Other translations talk of the waters entering “my being”. Yet others cry “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.” This image of the waters coming up to our neck is threatening but still gives room for hope, for the possibility of swimming or standing on tiptoe to avoid being totally submerged. Those other translations suggest that the time for swimming is long past: not only is the psalmist submerged by the water but its chaos has entered into him and he experiences it inside and out.

This is common to the experience of many of us. In recent times, when much has seemed uncertain and constantly changing in the life of our nation, when attacks elsewhere in Europe and the world have shown the fragility of life and the depth of our divisions, when 24hour news coverage has demanded our attention with its reporting of the slightest change or even the absence of change as a matter of great import and urgency, when leaders and structures and even the future have been depicted as being threatened and unstable, many will have felt the feeling of threat and instability washing around their neck, or entering their soul or their being.

Many of us may have felt overwhelmed or unsettled, mirroring what is happening around us. In this or at other occasions in our lives we may know the feeling of the storm being inside us as well as around us ‘deep calling to deep’ as Psalm 42 v7 puts it.

But it’s also a common experience of oppression and pain: accusations, taunts, the ways we are treated by the persecutor enter into us until we begin to believe them ourselves, to put ourselves down. The storm enters us and we become part of it adding to its noise and force. We find ourselves unable to leave behind the voices of those who malign us because they echo inside our heads and our whole being, travelling with us wherever we go. Into and out of this storm of voices, inside and out, into and out of this storm of attacks, persecution and uncertainty, the psalmist speaks. And his voice contains anger at those who persecute him and implied anger at the God who seems to allow it and on whom he calls to act.

In a dramatic episode of the American television series, ‘The West Wing’, which depicts the life of a fictitious President of the United States and his staff, we see the President overcome by grief, guilt and anger. His elderly PA, Joyce Landingham, had bought her first new car and, driving it home from the dealership had been killed by

a drunk driver. He was facing charges for having lied about his health. All this in a year which had seen him and members of his staff shot and a navy supply ship containing 60 or so service personnel sunk by a storm with no survivors.

At the end of Mrs Landingham's funeral, we see the President standing alone in the Cathedral after everyone else has left. A tropical storm is brewing and battering outside. Inside the storm of his anger and grief overflows as he berates God:

"You're a son of a bitch, You know that? She bought her first new car and You hit her with a drunk driver. What, was that supposed to be funny?"

"You can't conceive, nor can I, the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God,' says Graham Greene. "I don't know whose ass he was kissing there 'cause I think You're just vindictive..... "

"I've committed many sins. Have I displeased You, You feckless thug? 3.8 million new jobs, that wasn't good? Bailed out Mexico, increased foreign trade...That's not enough to buy me out of the doghouse?"

Like many of us when grief is raw, his grief turned to rage and this anger enables him to challenge some of the ways in which he is feeling dragged into shame and despair. It leads him to challenge the assessments made by others, to clearly state his achievements in the face of so many quoting his sins and failing leading him to look for someone to blame. In the same way, the psalmist tells of his zeal for God's house in the face of the persecution he experiences. Shouting angrily of his hardships to a God who does not seem to act to prevent them.

To show his anger and his wish for God to save him the writer of Psalm 69 uses images of God's providence and love found in many other psalms but turns them on their head.

Let their table be a trap for them,  
a snare for their allies.  
Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and make their loins tremble continually.  
Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.  
May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one live in their tents.  
For they persecute those whom you have struck down,  
and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more.  
Add guilt to their guilt;

may they have no acquittal from you.  
Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

Here God's table, seen as a source of blessing, becomes their table and a trap. Here eyes, which elsewhere see God's blessing, are darkened and unreceptive. Here tents that elsewhere are a sign of home and family become a place of desolation. Here God's grace and forgiveness, found elsewhere in abundance, is requested to be denied. Here the book of the living becomes a means of exclusion not inclusion. Just as in the West Wing the President's burning anger turns against God, So here the psalmist's burning anger asks God to turn against those who persecute him. He takes the traditional language of trust and worship and turns it into protest.

In the same way the slave songs which gave birth to the blues took the language of worship required by the masters and used it to express grief, protest and anger in a way that defied censure and enabled them to challenge the images of oppression and persecution inflicted on them with the knowledge that they were children of God. These 'sorrow songs breathed the prayer and complaint of souls overflowing with the bitterest anguish.... The songs of the slaves represented their sorrows, rather than their joys, like tears, they were a relief to aching hearts.' They were songs rich in the imagery of the Bible which 'can't be sung without a full heart and a troubled spirit'. Songs like 'Didn't it rain' have biblical stories at their core but echo in them the grief that life had brought and filled slaves' souls and beings.

These songs declared that things would and must change. That God would act to bring justice. They refused the image of the singers as slaves given to them by their oppressors and replaced it with an image of themselves as God given, God empowered, fully human and worthy of life, respect and much more by putting themselves in the middle of God's story and telling their lives through God's story.

They made it clear that they expected those who didn't believe this would be held to account. And in that trust and that expectation with hearts still filled with grief, they were able to worship and give thanks. Just as in the end, having raged at God and rejected the assessments of his persecutors, the psalmist turns to thanksgiving in full trust

I will praise the name of God with a song;  
I will magnify him with thanksgiving.  
This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs.  
Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts  
revive.  
For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.

Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them.  
For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah; and his servants shall  
live there and possess it;  
the children of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall  
live in it.

So may we to sing our songs challenging oppression and persecution and may we  
hear the sorrow songs of others and in them hear the voice of God and God's  
people. May they inspire us to be God's partners in transforming the world and  
bringing in God's Kingdom.

## 4. There we sat down and wept

Based on Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.... we remembered home, and as we wept the people who were there made fun of us, told us to give them a song or do a turn from our old life... how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Have you ever been a stranger? And felt like rather than greeting you with generosity, the world around greeted you with hostility, making fun or just staring? Have you been tempted by anger in response?

A few years back our Superintendent Minister Jen Smith was working at the Villa Road Methodist Church in Birmingham, doing some academic research with the members there. Many of them were from the West Indies and had come in the 1950s. They had widely varied experiences, some good and some bad in the UK. Real people don't break down into sound-bites or generalisations. But feeling rejected in the foreign culture of the UK and trying to keep a sense of home alive as the host culture mocked or discriminated against them was a big theme people talked about. And folk used scripture to lift their own personal experience out of just being one person's story, to make it God's story.

Listen to how one woman talked about the low-level cultural hostility of the early years of her time in the United Kingdom, and how she developed a secret spiritual identity: Talking about '...the things you cannot do in England,' She explained that she had had to learn not to sing hymns in public after getting odd looks in the street, and how different this was from the Jamaica of her girlhood.

'...Now I keeps the song behind the teeth,' she said, smiling broadly and laughing (but not quite laughing all the way) to show what that looked like. To resist the daily cost of fitting-in to avoid hostility, she spoke of imagining a second self 'behind the teeth' of her smile, where she could sing and pray as loud as she liked and be at home.

The woman didn't name it explicitly, but this echoes the lament of Psalm 137. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion... for there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

The anger at the end of the Psalm allows us to acknowledge the anger someone might feel as a stranger rejected. We do not have to look far for examples of this anger, spilling over and destroying lives. The Psalm does not endorse violence - not at all - but it does recognise that we humans can get that angry. We can get that angry that we would snap, and do things as terrible as killing a child - think of the man who drove the lorry in Nice back in July (2016), ploughing through people on the seafront.

Lament keeps us from getting isolated by ourselves or in a little angry group. Lament saves us from destructive anger when we have been hurt or abandoned. If we do lament well, we will break the cycle of violence, and avoid getting so angry we end up hurting people long after the fact. Of course, most of us actually only hurt ourselves with the anger we keep hold of - lament helps there too. Even when we are a complete stranger, remembering this Psalm can give comfort: we are not alone, and our personal story is one many people have gone through before us.

When he found out the man whom he thought was his father was not his biological father, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said, among other things, (this is to paraphrase) 'Well, this is obviously a surprising thing, but I find my first identity in Jesus Christ, and the man who raised me is my Dad no matter what, so this really is not that big a deal.'

Being Christian will make us a stranger in the world, at one time or another, even if we never leave the place where we were born. But no matter how isolated we may ever feel, the lament of Psalm 137 reminds us that Jesus is our home and our family. We find our sense of self more and more in him, knowing that in the great cloud of witness that has gone before us, we are never on our own.

Lament reminds us Jesus is our home too. Listen finally to another woman from Villa Road Methodist Church, reciting the story of her mother's deathbed.

"When my mother was dying I can remember this. She called me by her bedside, and she said... 'I am going home to Jesus.....and 'Take care me Jesus now.' But the most important and the most shocking thing to me...'Lord Jesus, my name is Viola Rice! I am coming home Lord Jesus.' It was the most sincere thing I ever heard, it was so touching to me. And then she saying, 'Yes Lord, Yes Lord here am I Lord, I am coming I am coming.' And she says to me... 'Jesus is coming, He is coming,' and she says 'My name Lord is Viola Rice! My name is Viola Rice, I am coming,' and touch me, and up to now."

"And I'm saying, 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?' And that lived with me for the rest of my life."

## 5. My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass

Based on Psalm 102

There was a story in the media recently mourning the fact that the first Bramley apple tree, from which all others have been grown, was 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 it 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 at which 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 cliché 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 it's 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 Psalm 102 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 goodbyes and know that we mourn and face fresh beginnings fully alive in the present?

## 6. Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Based on Psalm 77

Nobody knows you when you're down and out. So sings Bessy Smith in a song which 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.

Psalm 77 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, through their 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, Ziva, 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 shows 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 creaturehood. 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 ploughshares. 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 His 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.