

**Pentecost 15**  
**12/09/2004**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28**  
**Psalm 14**  
**1 Timothy 1:12-17**  
**Luke 15:1-10**

### **Breaking into the darkness in search of the lost**

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There was a letter in the “Age” this week in which the author expressed a longing for the days of the Clinton era when the biggest topic of news revolved around his latest misdemeanour. As we mark the anniversary of September 11 by sifting through the rubble and the implications of Belsan and Jakarta it is hard to avoid the feeling we have lost something. Will we ever again live free of fear? What would it take to turn the world around from this cycle of violence? The time we are living in will one day be known as the Age of Terror and one day, we hope, we will be able to say, “Now it is over”. But that day will not come until we find an alternative approach to dealing with the longstanding, deep-seated grievances that exist between nations and peoples.

It is salutary to hear from a section of Jeremiah that is unrelieved in its darkness. The only line which seems to offer hope - “Yet I will not make a complete end” - probably means - there is more destruction to come! The literature of judgement is a challenge. What are we to make of the image of God we see here? What was Jeremiah saying to his time, and what can we make of it for today?

The stark section we have before us is, however, set in a context where God is imaged as a wounded, betrayed lover who is yearning for a lost relationship to be restored. The hope of a past love has been severely bruised. God is affronted, dismayed, and filled with fierce indignation - and yet is open to a new beginning. Restoration will involve a demanding and costly repentance - something that is possibly beyond the means of the wayward partner. The yearning for restoration is so strong, in order to achieve it, the lover will risk even defilement. When we think of the Gospel today, and other parts of Luke, we can see here an anticipation of the story to come.

The mood of the section before us is dark and harsh. There is a destructive ill wind representing a severe political and military threat from the north. Not by supernatural intervention from on high, but in the movements of history does God work, which is why the covenant relationship is so important. Israel’s dalliance with other Gods has been so shameless the breach of covenant is likened to the collapse of the cosmic order. What is happening here? Walter Brueggemann regards this section, not as a scientific description of an event, but as a poetic intervention aimed at penetrating the religious indifference of the people. Jeremiah placed before Israel an unthinkable scenario of the crushing of Jerusalem. He wrote a tract for his times and hoped that such extreme images might cause Israel to reflect on what had been lost, and the depth of feeling God attached to their failure in relationship.

Helen Garner’s new book, Joe Cinques’ Consolation is a tract for our times in a similar but different sense. It is the story of an Engineer from Newcastle who had a relationship with a beautiful but completely indulged and self obsessed woman, Anu Singh, who was studying Law in Canberra. Despite her many advantages in looks, and intelligence, Anu Singh decided to commit suicide and planned to take Joe Cinque with her. No one

told Joe of her plans for him and he died as a result of drugs administered by her after a murder party. She did not go the next step and escaped with her own life. She was brought to trial but was acquitted on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Helen Garner's exploration of this story is disturbing. She is honest about how it touched her own life and throughout enables us to see how she struggled to name the realities of the story. Eventually she is grappling with the meaning of evil, the inability of the legal system to deal with ethics, let alone human wickedness, and she speculates on what possibilities there are for redemption in the situation. We see that she herself has made the journey through secularisation, the sexual revolution, the development of feminism and changes in the political and social scene, while grappling with deeper psychological issues about life. She shows us something of what has been lost. There is a scene in which Anu Singh's father describes a visit to his daughter in the lock up. He didn't ask about her crime. They talked instead about family, religion and peace of mind. "What religion are you?" said the prosecutor. "I believe in humanity." "And her beliefs about humanity?" "She is too young," said her father, "to have any beliefs." (p.29)

The dark pictures offered by Jeremiah and Helen Garner are works of imaginative creativity. In them we see that people do not know how to do good. Crimes and death and disaster unfold to reveal something substantial has been lost from the core of life. There is no faith. There is no basic respect for human life. There are no moral parameters to appeal to, and people have a limited sense of responsibility. It is as though the world is in danger of falling apart, and chaos is on the verge of coming again. These works have different bases, but they both rattle our cage. Reading them sensitive souls may begin to ask, what have we lost, and how can we find it again?

In Timothy Paul shows that something transformed his life. Once he was a terrorist: a blasphemer, persecutor and a man of violence, but then he was encountered by a resource of grace that enabled him to make a seemingly impossible deep repentance. It was the power of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, that brought this change. But what does that power look like?

Luke shows us in the conflict between Jesus and the righteous over his practice of receiving the unworthy and eating with them. The parables reveal his rationale. The lost who are unable to help themselves are the objects of generous, restoring love. The rationale has its source in his ability to comprehend the will of God and live within the covenant as an act of love. The other side of Jeremiah's dark prophecy is to be found here. The lover who is wounded over the loss of relationship is moved to reach out to the unlovable, and to risk becoming unclean in the process. The lost are touched by grace, enabling the deep repentance that bears fruit in restored community life, the sign of which is table fellowship - the simple act which shows what full embrace means. And there is more joy over one such who is joined, than 99 who never had to make the journey. These two stories are followed by the parable of the prodigal son. Prodigal means recklessly wasteful, a lavish spender and we normally apply it to the son who left home. But it is rightly applied to God, who loves the lost to such an extent that they are welcomed to the table. These actions - identifying with, welcoming, joining, are the actions offered to us. They are the actions which provide the mainspring for our life in the world, and which will herald an alternative to the emptiness and fear in which we live.

After the Belsan tragedy Vladimir Putin was criticized for his violent intentions, which were exactly like those of others. After the Jakarta bombing Brian Deegan, the Adelaide Magistrate who lost his son in Bali, challenged Canberra to open dialogue with Jemaah

Islamiah. There may be limits to such a strategy, but it is certain that adding violence to violence increases the darkness and deepens the loss rather than restores lost peace. Coming to the table for dialogue may enable both sides to find new ways through the chaos. At some point we have to try and live out that creative, imaginative act in which God, for the sake of what had been lost, risked total identification with us, even to the point of being put on trial and dying a criminal's death.