

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Psalm 79
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Gilead was a city located in particularly rugged country, and its citizens had a reputation for doing evil. Yet from this harsh and treacherous environment an aromatic, antiseptic resin with medicinal properties was exported to surrounding lands. Even the worst the world could offer yielded something positive that would sooth and heal.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Jeremiah's question is voiced in a passage in which the mood is one of inconsolable grief. Jeremiah's heartsick question asks, "Is there anything healing and good, any relief at all to be found, in the present situation between God and the people." He asked this because something bigger than Hurricane Ivan, that this week swept through Florida and Alabama, was moving towards the people. They are facing total destruction, but they are numb: paralysed by apathy. Oblivious and impervious to Jeremiah's warnings they don't feel a thing. They are like the man from Mobile, Alabama, who said he was staying put because it wasn't going to happen. He clearly thought living in denial would get him through. Loss was not something he was going to contemplate. In Jerusalem they stated what would save them: "Is not the Lord in Zion? Is not her King in her?" Their belief was that God was resident in the Temple, enthroned on the praises of Israel. This was their holy insurance, which automatically protected them against destruction, regardless of their serial involvement in diverse forms of evil! Jeremiah perceived that at heart there was deeper crisis of faith. He knew the songs of the people were no longer holy for, in spite of how it seemed, they did not know the God they called upon. Their high sounding liturgy was empty. The irony was that God was still with them but in a way that was totally different to the one they claimed. God's presence was with them in the form of impending disaster, born of unrelenting anger at their preference for false gods. We have difficulty talking about the anger of God, but anger is inseparable from grief.

Jeremiah's profound expression of grief is his last resort. By this he attempts to cut through the numbness insulating the people. Sometimes only suffering will create change, and sometimes the suffering needs to be shown by another. Jeremiah's grief was not born of self-pity, even though he would share their fate. His sorrow overflowed at the loss of the relationship between them and God. His grief was deeper still for knowing that God's anger was profoundly connected to God's grief over that very loss; that God suffered deeply because of it.

In this passage it is hard to distinguish the voice of the prophet from the voice of God. When Jeremiah wished that his head was a spring of water so that he could weep endlessly, there is a reflection of God's inconsolable sorrow at the turn of events. God has entered into the heart of Jeremiah, and Jeremiah has entered into the heart of God. Both are deeply disturbed and suffer because something of great value has gone missing, and all attempts to restore it had failed. Sorrow was the only thing left.

The lamentations we find in this section of Jeremiah witness to something which is

difficult to face: it is possible to arrive at a very hard place in life where no hope is to be found and there is nothing to salve the wound. The only thing to do is to mourn. This may seem to pose a problem to people of faith. We usually want to find a way through the tough spots or, like the people of old, expect that faith will protect us from real suffering. But the literature of Lament, which is what this is, allows us to see that the overflowing cry of sorrow we utter at the place where God seems most absent, is also a cry to God, and a cry of God. The cry of Jesus from the cross: "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" is a sorrowful lament of one who suffered deeply through the conflicts and the contradictions of the world. But it nevertheless is a cry to God, made while we betrayed, denied and killed him. Faith did not allow Jesus to find a way around his pain, but it did take him through it, and from this we saw that God stands with us when we least expect it.

The literature of Lament is something we do not dwell on much in the church. It has been suggested that once ideas of an afterlife grew there seemed less need for poems and songs that witnessed only to the hard places of life. Ideas of an afterlife may seem to offer a palliative to death and grief, but the biblical theme is that those who mourn will be comforted, not those who deny their pain. Because of this it is possible to say there may be balm in Gilead, but the salve may come from an unexpected place. It is significant that the slave song changed Jeremiah's question into a statement.

There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul.
Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend,
And if you lack the knowledge, He'll ne'er refuse to lend.

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, and say: "He died for all".

This would seem triumphalistic were it not for the context in which this song was developed. Not in the classroom of a rich school, or the stately rooms of a comfortable mansion were these words formed, but in poverty, humiliation, alienation and grief. In their suffering the slaves found liberation in a story that took them beyond themselves to the suffering of another, and there they found the balm of knowing that God entered fully into their lot in life and suffered for and with them. And so, rather than living in denial, or being paralysed by their circumstances, they learned to live a new life which drew hope and light from a context beyond their own. In trying circumstances, amongst people who did not treat them well, they found there was a balm in Gilead.

This might seem to be a gloomy sort of sermon, but Jeremiah's text is again a tough one. But it is no tougher than our daily intake of news which offers us a diet of escalating horrors in the world. As politicians posture and people of faith pray, the inhuman sufferings of the Sudanese and the escalating terror of life in Iraq shame us while, in the aftermath of Beslan, we wonder where God is. The tradition offers us the cry of lament: "Why?" This is not a request for information, but a cry born of people who do not suffer from the lack of feeling which is apathy, but are willing to embrace the suffering of the world, and cry to God in the face of it. Lament opens to us the possibility, not of finding answers, but of finding that God laments the hardness of human hearts, and longs for more who will be open to their neighbours' pain and stand with them in their suffering. This is what God has done for us and all people, and we are called to embrace the love we have been shown, and proclaim the same to others, that many may share the balm that is in Gilead for us and all people.