

Pentecost 4
28/6/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

The glory of God lies slain on the high places: giving voice to silence through lament

“The glory of God lies slain on the high places...” so begins David’s lament over the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan, a friend of unequalled courage, loyalty and devotion to David. The pathos and dignity of this lament is remarkable, and unexpected. Saul feared David as a rival for the throne of Israel and had tried to kill him. Jonathan, technically the rightful heir, disregarded his own interests to become David’s protector. With the death of Saul and Jonathan no barriers remained to David’s ability to achieve full political power. But David did not dance with glee on the graves of his opponents. Instead he showed himself capable of deep and noble tributes to both men. They were: “beloved and lovely, swifter than eagles and stronger than lions.” David was able to put his own thoughts aside: “he got out of the way” and enabled the people to see that the loss of these men was a deep and hurtful moment in the life of Israel.

The Saul years were significant, but were not glamorous ones for Israel. Because of Saul a tribal confederation began to make the difficult transition towards becoming a nation state, and Israel’s dignity was preserved through holding the Philistines at bay. With Saul and Jonathan’s death something precious was lost that would not be restored. David names the dead and the amazing love of his politically useful friend, now gone. But David did not intrude his own wishes. Instead he invited the people to join in public sorrow over this loss.

In a week when we, and the church as a whole, have suffered a loss in our ranks in the death of Allan Wendelken it is salutary to have this lament before us, not because it relates directly to Allan, but because it provides us with an example of dignified honesty applied in a situation of grief and loss. It has other implications too. This week we have been disturbed by the image of the bloodied face of a young woman, shot down in Iran during the crackdown on protests over the election results. Where do we find the words to express the rage and dismay at all such a sight represents?

One of the gifts of our tradition is that the language of the Psalms and the literature of lament provide a means by which we can name our losses, rage at the injustices, and break the death dealing silence that denial imposes on our grief over the loss of what is noble, beautiful and treasured in the world. A community that becomes mesmerised into denial and refuses to admit the depth of grief over a tragic mistake or profound loss cuts itself off from the healing that honesty and truthfulness can bring. Walter Brueggemann says ‘where loss is not grieved barriers to newness remain’. [*1+2 Samuel* p 214] Where control and denial hold sway, there is no room for “the hiatus in reality” that produces grief and opens the door to new life. The path to salvation begins by being able to receive and embrace woundedness. Such a thing seems antithetical to being human, but without this we never come to the place where life breaks through.

The literature of Lament, including the Psalms, characteristically makes possible the honest and public naming of things we find difficult: our profound sorrow, our deep sense of loss, our love for people and things now gone, the senselessness of tragedy, our rage at the unfairness of life, and even our anger at God. In our tradition we have this resource but could make better use of it than we do. And it is true that in our culture generally we are not very good at public grief and emotional pain.

The Bendigo Art Gallery currently has on show an exhibition drawn from nearly 900 negatives of photos taken by two soldiers during World War I. Because of the tradition that has existed amongst us of not talking about deep and painful things, the negatives sat unknown in a tin in a farm shed for decades, and were only accidentally rescued from destruction. The photos are not gruesome, they expose the viewer to a slice of life not seen before: the ordinary life of soldiers at the front. They powerfully underline the loss of innocence this treacherous war created for us. The interpretive essays in the book from the exhibition name some of the realities that most of us perceive but never talk about: the shocking mismanagement that led to the loss of so much life and talent. From a population of 8 million 324 000 went overseas, almost half of these were wounded and nearly 62 000 did not come home. By the 1930s another 60 000 had died from wounds or illnesses caused by the war. [*Camera on the Somme* p 19] The nation did very little for its courageous men and women who served, and we seem to be confused about what Anzac day is for. It is hard to resist the idea this is an outcome of never being able to hear and own the stories of kindness and self-sacrifice that abounded amid the cruelty and destruction of these events, and honestly lament the losses.

The language of Lament provides us with a means to name what has happened at the depths, or the edges, of our life whereas our common resort to “not speaking” may leave us numb, or stuck in grief and anger and despair. Not only are we poorer for not knowing the truth about deep and tragic events, we are less healthy as a society, for we have not opened up “the hiatus” that allows the new life, born of grief, to break through. While football games on Anzac day become occasions for recruiting new blood to supply the forces, we fail to recognize the full reality of what it meant that our glory lay dead on the fields of Europe.

David’s Lament for Saul and Jonathan can also teach us something in the way he keeps the focus in the right place: it is not about him. This is remarkable because David was ambitious: but he was not overtaken by what this loss meant for his future. He was able to dwell on the qualities of both men with dignity and profound honesty. The literature of Lament is not like the sloppy poetry the community resorts to at this time. It expands the boundaries of what may be mentioned in grief. Permission is given to mention the unmentionable, to bring into the light of day realities hardly ever expressed. And it enables us to sing to God in the deepest places of life. Lament is not for wallowing in anguish. It is to allow anguish a proper place in life. This may not bring “closure”, because there are ways in which grief does not end, but it may enable us to move beyond the loss. Perhaps that is why in the following chapters of Samuel we see David inquire of the Lord what to do next.

David's inquiry is a clue to the fact that all we have been talking about is held within a larger context of a merciful God whose liberating power was already known in Israel. To wait on God, as Psalm 130 calls us to do, is to express hope in God's faithfulness. The content of that hope is expressed in the word redeem - liberating potential made available to Israel. The Psalm anticipates what is made clear in the Gospel: God has made redeeming power available to us in Jesus Christ. We see this in the stories about the two women in Mark, both of whom suffered different forms of death. In both cases Jesus raised a woman to new life, and his healing work caused him to become polluted. The point is theological: this is the indiscriminate self-giving of God, which shapes what we mean by love. That love caused God to change places with us, to the extent that after having suffered and lamented all that we know the glory of God lay slain on the high places of Israel. He became poor, that we might be rich: his suffering enabled new life for us. This is a foundational thought for us in our life of worship and service as church. With this in view we are free, not to deny death, but to honestly lament its continuing influence among us, and turn afresh to God, who is our help and strength. And in that strength, live.
