

Pentecost 19
3/10/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Lamentations 1:1-6
Lamentations 3:19-26
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!

One of the differences between the gold rushes in Victoria, compared with Western Australia was the type of country in which gold was found. In Victoria it was discovered in rich, arable land and once it could not be found on the surface it was possible to establish farms and towns and businesses, and communities continued to thrive. In Western Australia gold was discovered in the wilderness and the booming cities that rapidly sprang up declined to next to nothing because the context would not support them once the gold ran out. If you have ever seen Coolgardie, or some of the even more remote places such as Cue, Gwalia or Kookynie, you will know what a ghost town is. The feeling of sadness is palpable. Majestic public buildings and the ostentatious houses built by magnates stand isolated and derelict in streets bereft of people, marked by the detritus of more glorious days. In this context, or perhaps one of the towns devastated by bushfire in this state, it is possible to empathise with the words from Lamentations which bewail the destruction of Jerusalem and the departure of its majesty: *“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!”* Gone were the fruits of generations of habitation, including the Temple, the most precious centre of Jerusalem, bringing an end to the era when “Zion” was a destination for pilgrims, God seekers who, joyful at the sight of the city, would be greeted by celebrating crowds of celebrating people. Bereft of travellers the roads were now “in mourning” and the city was like a lover spurned or a friend betrayed. Houses were empty because the leadership had been carried off to a land where foreign gods were worshipped. Babylon was no resting place, no “home”. Here foes were in command and the suffering and distress of exile were the order of the day.

Exile was humiliating for another reason. It seemed to signal that God’s power and presence had departed from Israel. In the defeat it seemed God had been defeated too. And there was a third and more bitter possibility. The word of the prophets was correct: exile was God’s judgement on the unfaithfulness of the people. This negative message even so contained a ray of hope. It was God’s loving kindness that had been offended and as the people lamented it was possible to imagine God was also grieving the loss. “By the rivers of Babylon... we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” [Ps 137:1]

Lamentations is a book of five poems that are dirges, developed for use in rituals of mourning. Although Jeremiah is probably not the author of these poems, they have become associated with him because he was the weeping prophet who had announced the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of its people. The poetry reflects the agony of the loss of the city and the Temple, and projects this on a screen that is national as well as personal and communal. These are prayers of complaint in which the voice speaks for the community. While God is hardly addressed in them, there is reference to the steadfast love of God as shown in the section we had as our Psalm. In the modern Jewish calendar the whole of Lamentations is read on the day when the destruction of both Temples is commemorated. And these may be the prayers used by Jews when visiting the Wailing Wall.

In our culture we are not particularly good at grief. Grief is personal; something not spoken about. We think it is more important to get on with life than take time out to grieve. In films and novels we find writers explore what happens when the unresolved grief starts to deal with us. This is not only because culturally we have nothing to compare with Lamentations or Psalms to appeal to in our pain, it is because we are less able to reflect on pain and loss in a deep way. Even on Anzac day we don't mention the suffering, and we certainly don't express anger towards God. Amongst us, the most common resort in grief is to idealise what we had, which is a form of denial, or to glorify heroism even when it had a meaningless outcome. If we had ever really faced up to what it meant that blood was spilt from almost every family in Australia during the First World War it is possible we may have developed a language strong enough to carry the depth of feeling we would need. That would mean when we say: "Lest we forget" we might also have remembered the pointlessness of war, rather than glorified the wasteful heroism of our young. The fact that the Christian tradition hardly ever makes use of Lamentations, and resists the language of lament found in the Psalms, tells us that even in the church grief is private, and we are not comfortable with the public memory of deep pain.

If it were different amongst us, we would find it easier to understand the loss that was created when our ancestors colonised Aboriginal land, and it would not have taken us so long to apologise for what we did. Our relationship with Aboriginal people stands as a sign of how well or not we are able to grasp and acknowledge the suffering of others, and own the part we have played in their pain.

The church has within it a communal witness that reaches into the deepest recesses of our humanity. As part of our rich heritage we have poetry and verse of deep feeling and emotion such as we find in Lamentations. We are blest because rituals and songs of mourning are essential to the wellbeing and survival of communities. The gift of lament should not be pushed aside but embraced as a resource that may help us not only deal with grief, but discover new dimensions in the story of God-with-us that we celebrate here. With lament in our keeping we may find ourselves no longer lost for words: unable to express the depth of our sorrow, grief and anger – even our anger towards God.

Lamentations and passages in the Psalms as well were inspired by the worst possible circumstances, but Lament involves more than complaining. These words have a tone of fidelity. The surprising thing about life in pain filled Babylon was that when Israel sang its song there it found keeping faith in a foreign land was possible, and developed new ways of being faithful people. While the people were dispersed amongst the nations and mourned the loss of home in the deepest sense, they did find "home" in their new place. Suffering and faith could co-exist. Israel had not been abandoned in exile and even by the rivers of Babylon their songs were songs to God. In exile they took account of the world they lived in and reflected on their own theology and renewed it, giving it new emphases. In exile Israel kept the Sabbath as a sign of who God was for them, and it became true that the Sabbath kept them.

Suffering and faith go together and there is no need to be ashamed of this. The second letter of Paul to Timothy is written “as if” Paul is in prison. His suffering is not punishment, but part of the apostolic witness, signalling that he is genuinely linked to the faithful suffering of Christ. “Paul” is concerned to pass on the faith to rekindle the flame in Timothy, a preacher who may have been under pressure or in danger of growing cold. The spirit called for is not a spineless, broad speaking about love, but a confidence in who God has revealed himself to be for us in Jesus Christ, in whose service Paul was suffering in prison. The call to the church in second Timothy is to return to the apostolic faith, the creed we confess, which has suffering at its heart. The apostolic faith not only informs us but it forms us according to its cruciform shape. This is the divine treasure, and in the riches of this faith are we are called to live. Even the smallest grain of this faith will be enough, because it does not rely on us, but on the one who gave it to us that we may have life in his name.
