

**Pentecost 4**  
**2/7/2006**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**2 Samuel 1:1; 17-27**  
**Psalm 130**  
**2 Corinthians 8:7-15**  
**Mark 5:21-43**

### **Lament, life and faith**

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In 1995 when we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, the ABC gathered interviews from those who had served. The stories, many heard for the first time, were very illuminating. A former soldier said, after he came back the phones ran hot. Asked what this meant he explained that he went home to Brisbane and his mate to Adelaide. Although both had wives and families and lives to re-engage with, they found the adjustment extremely difficult. "For five years we were never further than a few metres away from one another. We supported each other through all circumstances. There was never a decision made or an action taken without us discussing it together." Suddenly this intimacy was lost, and the two used to get on the phone every day to talk things over. This was possibly the first time this deep relationship had been publicly named and claimed. This story shed light on the bonds that developed between soldiers, and it did a lot to explain the need for gatherings on Anzac day, when those who understand what it means to pass through a war, are present to talk with.

David's Lament for Saul and Jonathan, particularly the last part where he grieves for his relationship with Jonathan whose love had been "more precious than a wife" reminded me of this story. These days, when same sex connections are being highlighted, some scholars deny this possibility between David and Jonathan, while others seek to claim it. Wise scholars in the field say we can neither rule in or out such a relationship. Neither can we sidestep the deep, loyal and loving link between the two.

Jonathan was Saul's son and rightful heir to the throne, but David had been secretly anointed by Samuel to be the next king. After David slew Goliath Jonathan pledged himself to David, even though this put his own future at risk and caused a rift in the royal household. Jonathan also saved David's life when Saul tried to kill him. The two were fine men, well matched. Jonathan's devotion to David was elemental. In his grief, David was uninhibited in naming and claiming the profundity of their link, which went far beyond anything based on political expediency.

The literature of Lament characteristically makes possible the honest and public naming of things we so often 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 loss, and even our anger at God. In our church tradition we have made little use of the literature of Lament. And it is true that in our culture generally we are not very good a public grief.

One thing Lament gives us is the language to express what has happened at the depths, or the edges, of our life. Naming what is there allows us to process what we are going through, whereas our common resort to "not speaking" helps to keep us stuck in grief and anger and despair. We are blessed with a tradition that has such language,

particularly in the Psalms, which allows us to engage with loss, when the culture around us would silence serious speech and deny or minimise the reality and tragedy of grief. Having words for grief is liberating. Lack of them will leave us numb and unable to hope or care.

The second thing about David's Lament for Saul and Jonathan is that he keeps the focus in the right place. How many times have you heard an oration at a funeral that says more about the person giving it than the person who has died? This case is all the more remarkable because David was ambitious. He was the anointed successor to Saul, who was his enemy, and Jonathan was his major contender. Yet David is not overtaken by what this loss means for his future ambitions. His great and respectful heart is able to dwell on the qualities of both men. Saul, in whom the threat of the Philistines was faced, and the nation began the long journey from tribalism to becoming a nation state. And Jonathan, whose shining courage and loyalty now lay dead on the mountains.

The way the literature of Lament expands the boundaries of what may be mentioned in grief is perhaps one of the most liberating things it has to offer. Permission is given to mention the unmentionable; to bring into the light of day realities hardly ever expressed. We could do with better rituals of lament. As a nation, and individually, we are good at self-deception. We like to pretend everything is alright, as if there would be something wrong in saying what real loss is like. The Port Arthur Massacre was hailed at the time as "the biggest massacre" in Australian history. We should not seek to diminish the loss of those who suffered as a result of what happened there, but it pails in significance when compared with the massacres of Indigenous people in Australia. Our resistance to the truth of this underlying story keeps our Indigenous people subservient, cuts them off from their real sense of peace amongst us, and keeps alive a false picture of what life here is like. All this makes it impossible to reconcile and move on. We make a lot of Anzac day, but has not the history of our country since WWI included a continual stream of losses, rather than a sequence of triumphs, in which the weapons of war took from us the lovely and the beloved. And, as the Uniting Church does things which dismay and disturb people, and distrust and discontent is fostered, perhaps we need a day of Lament, in which our frustrations and sadness could be voiced, rather than trying to carry on without really naming the death of our hopes and dreams for our church.

David's lament notices the overwhelming sadness of a pivotal event and places it before us. Caravaggio understood this, and he understood David's Lament. His painting of an earlier scene, the slaying of Goliath by David, shows David with the head of the giant in his hands. Both sets of eyes are sad. Victor and the vanquished suffer when the sword is taken up. Wise eyes that see this is so.

In his Lament David's song makes it possible to widen the space for grief, to break down our muteness concerning the things that bring us sorrow. Lament is not for wallowing in anguish. It is to allow anguish a proper place in life so that we can move beyond the loss. Perhaps that is why the chapters of Samuel move swiftly on, and we see David inquire of the Lord what to do next.

That David so inquires means 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 the Psalm calls us to do, is to express a buoyant 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 the power of life 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. God changed places with us. God suffered, and lamented, all that we know. He became poor, that we might be rich. This is a model, which is foundational for us in our life of worship and service. With this in our sights, we are free, not to deny death, but to lament its continuing influence among us, and turn afresh to God, who is our help and strength. And in that strength, live.