

Pentecost 20
6/10/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Lamentations 1:1-6

Canticle: **Lamentations 3:19-26**

Luke 17:5-10

‘How lonely sits the city that was once full of people.’ (*Lam 1:1*)

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Chris Mostert

[A] Introduction

Perhaps like some of you, I was once briefly in St Petersburg; it’s a beautiful city on the delta of the River Neva. I went on a day trip to the fabulous Summer Palace, built for the Imperial rulers of Russia a few hundred years ago. On the way out there, our attention was drawn to the area where German and Russian troops faced each other in World War II. The city was then called Leningrad.

Leningrad was subject to the most famous siege of the War; perhaps the most famous in history. It lasted 900 days (from 8 Sept 1941 till 27 Jan 1944). It was a time of unimaginable malnutrition and suffering as well as the extraordinary heroism. Between 600 and 800 thousand people died in a population of *c.* 3 million. But the city never surrendered. What did people do? What did they think? What did they feel? How did they cope?

[B] Jerusalem under siege

We don’t know what it is like to live under siege! We have seen it only at a distance, through pictures and words. Today’s reading and canticle, from the tiny OT book of *Lamentations* – a bit like a small book of Psalms – tells us something of the story of the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The book of *Jeremiah*, our focus on Sunday mornings over these two months, also does this, particularly from the standpoint of Israel’s **God**. Again and again, Jeremiah prophesies the end of the dynasty of David.

Israel – or what was left of it, Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital – was a tiny, vulnerable nation in the middle of a massive geo-political upheaval in what we call the Middle East. The super-powers were Assyria (to the north) and Egypt (to the south). But a new player had emerged, Babylon, the *China* of its day; and Babylon is surrounding Jerusalem.

History teaches us that empires and super-powers rise and fall; there are limits to the power of nations (and, be it noted, large companies) that can’t be crossed with impunity. It is true for Israel, now as in ancient times, and for Australia. Essentially, this was the message of the prophets. But whereas Jeremiah related this fact of life to the purpose and reign of God, the modern world – or should I say the Western world – has become too sophisticated – or is it too blind, or too one-sidedly secular? – to understand the course of history in these terms. We don’t think of God as perplexingly silent; the modern West sees God as simply non-existent! Jeremiah and the others responsible for the content of this book

are trying ‘to make *theological sense* out of a *geopolitical crisis*.’¹ Here lies only one of the challenges of the book of Jeremiah.

A word about the book of *Lamentations*: it was not written by Jeremiah but it does echo what he had said about the prospect of Jerusalem’s destruction. It’s a series of five poems, laments, grieving over what has happened to Jerusalem, including the forced exile of many of its leading citizens. How can they come to terms with this calamity?

[C] Lament over Jerusalem

‘How lonely sits the city that once was full of people ... she that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.’ (1:1) It’s a bitter experience: Jerusalem’s glory has been destroyed. Jerusalem ‘weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her.’ (1:2) Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper ...’ (1:5) And to add insult to injury, ‘How the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion!’ (2:1) ‘... the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions.’ (1:5)

It is easy to form a very distorted picture of God from texts like these. Many of us, I imagine, grew up with a very simple equation connecting the experience of terror and tragedy with the punishment of God. Many texts in the Bible, read simply at face value, create or reinforce such ideas. But the ways of God are not to be confused with the ways of creatures like ourselves, even though these provide the only analogies that we have.

- Does God send us wars and terrors, senseless violence and indiscriminate killing? Not as *we* might express our anger in violence of word or deed or bully someone weaker than ourselves!
- Does God cause boats filled with people seeking refuge to capsize in stormy seas with the loss of scores (or hundreds) of people? Not as *we* might deliberately or even unintentionally cause injury to an innocent person!
- Does God inflict on us the suffering of incurable disease, accidental death or intentional evil? Not as *we* might, in anger, wish someone dead or maliciously attack another person or a whole group or city of people!

To compare God with what is *best* in humankind is to understate what God is like. To compare God with what is *worst* in humankind is grossly to distort what God is like! We can never think or speak adequately about God; but we can hope (and try) to think and speak least inadequately, least distortedly, about God.

But this is not to say that there are not *consequences* of human actions, evil actions as well as good actions. There are *consequences* of the ‘laws’ of physics and of genetics. There are *consequences* of letting or forcing people to live in conditions where there is no love, no compassion, no employment, no hope, no access to education, health care, or no help in coping or dealing with problems.

¹ W. Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

The prophets and those behind Lamentations drew a straighter line than we might today between disaster and suffering, on the one hand, and the purpose and action of God, on the other. But that doesn't mean that there isn't a word here from God for us today.

[D] God is present in suffering and pain

In times of war and terror many people have lost their faith, so we are told. In Auschwitz many Jews and Christians lost their faith, so I understand. But in Auschwitz – and other concentration camps like it – many Jews continued to recite the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) and many Christians continued to pray the Lord's Prayer. This is not to condemn those who lost their faith and to praise those who kept their faith! We don't know why one person can *no longer* believe and another can *continue* to believe. But it does have something to do with how we understand God.

In a remarkable passage from chapter 3 of *Lamentations* – the verses of our Canticle this morning – we hear another note than just bewilderment and despair. 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.' (3:22) As one commentator writes, here is 'the testimony of one who has somehow survived the end of the world and sounds an impossible note of hope among the ruins.'² Where does this hope come from? It comes from remembrance; from seeing the present in a wider perspective. Despair and hope do not cancel each other out; not for the suffering Jews of Jerusalem destroyed, nor for people living in the midst of calamity and fear in many places today.

God's voice is actually silent in these five chapters of *Lamentations*, but that doesn't mean that God has gone away. There is something the poet remembers: God has counted for something in the past, when things were different; therefore God can't be left out of the story in the present circumstances, devastating as they are. This is not the first time the Jews had lived between memory and hope. God had created Israel but not just to destroy it. Israel had seemingly fallen out of God's hands before, only to discover that 'the everlasting arms' (Deut 33:27) were still underneath her. We should therefore 'wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.' (Lam 3:26) [That doesn't mean, 'Do nothing!']

God is present to human pain not in punishment but in solidarity and consolation. Christians have more reason than others to believe this: in the person of the Suffering Servant, the crucified Messiah, the Son of the eternal Father, God stands *with* us, right in the midst of tragedy and turmoil, anguish and pain. And in the resurrection of the same Jesus, God turns the darkness into light and life.

[E] Conclusion

This larger view, looking past immediate experience to other times and circumstances, gives hope a look in. We are, of course, inveterate hopers! But true hope responds to possibilities, divine possibilities, a divine promise. We

² W.H. Gloer, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 4 (Westminster John Knox, 2010), 129.

‘hope against hope’, as a childless Abraham did when hearing God’s promise that he would become the father of a great nation. (Rom 4:18) We hope for the coming of God’s reign in its fullness because we have seen its dawning in the words and deeds of Jesus. That is a ground for hope.

We, a people formed by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, have a ground for hope which we cannot suppress; not without contradicting our God-given identity. That’s a reason for giving thanks, and no adversity or suffering can permanently erase it.

Thanks be to God!
