

**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1**

**Psalm 79**

**Luke 16:1-16**

**Tears without fear**

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*In a sentence:*

*Even death and deepest loss are not outside the reach of God*

Last week a couple of Jesus' parables led us to reflections on being lost and found. We'll take this a little further today, and notice that in being lost, *we* are not simply lost; we *lose* something – our bearings, in particular. We suddenly realise that the landmarks which signalled where we were are now gone, and we no longer have the clues we need to get home. Our next steps now lack confidence because we have to guess which way to move, and that can just make things worse.

At the centre of today's reading is the crushing grief Jeremiah feels at what is happening to his "poor people": the cry of his poor people, the hurt of his poor people, the health of his poor people, the slain of his poor people. Whereas elsewhere we hear much accusation and threat from Jeremiah, now we hear his sadness, sickness and suffering over the realisation of his preaching: the fall of Jerusalem. There is no consolation here, no premature word of hope or comfort. Whatever hope or comfort might yet be heard, the present pain is pain. In place of the prayer he has been warned not to pray for this people (7.16; 11.14; 14.11) is his grief, for he cannot but weep. And even this grief is yet incomplete; the only prayer he does intimate is for more tears: "O that my head were a spring of water" that I might cry a fountain of tears.

Most of us don't know grief like this. We might suspect that it is felt in cities across Ukraine and in 15,000(?) lounge rooms in Russia. We are learning how colonised, dispossessed and enslaved peoples have known something of such loss, and we know something of it when we lose one we've loved. Less dramatically but still painfully, the experience of the church in our society today has some relationship to what Jeremiah describes, and probably even more so here at MtE. Our departure from what has been so deeply valued in this place will hurt, and all the more so in the broader context of the church's fortunes in societies like ours. In this experience of disorientation – of even being lost – we cast around to discover how it happened. We retrace our steps, hoping to pick up the track again at the point where we strayed. If we find a way back, we plan and regulate to ensure it doesn't happen again.

Surprisingly, this is not what Jeremiah does. He knows why the people have been lost: *God* has done this. With the other classical prophets, Jeremiah sees the disasters visited upon God's people as God's own judgement, exercised in the form of the marauding Assyrians and Babylonians. To our modern sensibilities in and out of the church, this a horrific assertion. It horrifies us partly because we are deeply impressed with the thought that God is love, which doesn't look like love. And it horrifies us because it is dangerous to read history like this. We are tempted to imagine that what good happens to us is God's blessing and what bad happens to others is God's curse – that we and they "deserved" what we got. For this reason, the later apocalyptic prophets read the sufferings of history differently, now more in terms of an absence of God's justice than its destructive presence.

But Jeremiah and the older prophets are not being primitive in their proclamation. Seeing God's hand in the catastrophe allows that God is not dead or powerless – that the God of Israel is not subject to the god(s) of Assyria or Babylon. The God of Israel still oversees history, even as everything falls apart. It is with this careful bracketing – the thought that surely *only* God could stand so devastatingly against God's people – that the prophets see God as the cause of Israel's disaster.

Few prophets today – at least among us – dare to attribute the ongoing losses of the church in our society to God's own action. We think this does God a favour. We take responsibility for the decline and get busy backtracking to see where we lost the way; we develop visions and strategies. Without the courage of the prophets, however, we unintentionally cut ourselves off from God. Now church decline is either all our fault – which is too hard to bear – or God is weak or dead, which becomes harder to deny. And so we have no sense of what might come next and whether it will be bearable, or whether God will even be there for us. Everything now becomes our responsibility – that we are lost, and how we might get un-lost again. Any thought of justification by grace – or *being found* by grace – goes out the window. The result is endless meetings to discuss what the church should be doing and, after all that, still the possibility of fear and loathing when finally we decide.

For Jeremiah, the God who destroys is the God who can rebuild. This doesn't justify the loss or justify God. Justifying a loss involves invoking a calculus in which we *must* be deprived. This is the strange consolation we sometimes hear (or speak) in response to bereavement: that God “wanted” our loved ones to die, for our sake or theirs, as if death were a divine strategy. Rather, allowing what is lost to have been lost *in and through* God turns that loss into a call for response – a response in and to God, a response to the call to *live*. If Jeremiah is sure that God's hand is at play in the disaster unfolding in Jerusalem, it is because he is confident that this is not the end; God will continue with the people even through the tragedy. There is nothing they can do for themselves but wait – wait on the God who will surely gather them back again.

Jeremiah's flooding tears, then, are *tears without fear*. His is a “free” grief which feels the pain of loss but holds no fear for the future. If we fear for the future, grief can turn to anger, despair or nostalgia. Anger has its place, if it is without violence. Despair is a living death and scarcely an option for anyone who thinks anything has meaning, much less for those who utter the word “God” with any seriousness. The real temptation is nostalgia – the happy face of despair. Nostalgia imagines that it is enough for life to know where God once *was*. Once God loved us, but not now. Once we could point to the power of God in the masses of people, but not now. If we are believers, our nostalgia traps God in yesterday, before the tears came.

Against this, Christian discipleship is tears-without-fear. We look for not a little joy along the way, of course! But where there is sadness and loss – and there will surely be this – our tears are without fear. Even real and deep sadness need not be not despair. The Jewish-Christian vision is not tragic, and so our hopes far exceed nostalgia's ghosts of Gods-past.

Jeremiah's God gives, and takes away, and gives. We *must* live within this, for not to live here would be finally to despair in the face of death and loss. But there *is* the second giving – an intensifying of original gift – a *forgiving* which heals for life. And so we *can* live within sadness and loss – towards, through and out of it.

Blessed are the meek who learn this, Jesus says, though they have lost many things.  
The Lord gives, and takes away, and gives again: blessed be the name of the Lord.  
And blessed are those meek who find God's life within this, for they shall inherit all things.

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