

## Lament Sermon

Readings Psalm 69:1-4 and 31-33 as well as John 11:32-36.

The last time that you went through a crisis, what did you do on Sunday? Did you come along to church, let people know what was going on and receive emotional, practical and prayer support? Did you come along putting on a brave face pretending that you were fine, coping well thank you, and hoping that no one would ask you the question that would make you crack? Or did you stay at home because you couldn't face coming to church?

There's a tendency of people outside the church to think that Christians have it all together, all sorted and that we're somehow shiny and happy. We, inside the church, buy into this sometimes. I think that this is connected with some of the ideas of the prosperity gospel whereby our material blessings are directly proportional to our degree of faith. To admit to being broken, to life being awful, that we're not coping is a reflection of our lack of faith and trust in God and that we've got it all wrong. This can be linked with an underlying idea that among our reasons for following God is that He makes our lives better. God never promises that life will be better by following him and there are plenty of biblical examples of people for whom following God made life more problematic. Jeremiah made it very clear that following God made life very difficult indeed – it didn't stop him though. Do you think that Paul, going through shipwrecks and jailtime for preaching about Jesus thought that his life was materially better? Do you think that he would have changed anything?

Why is it that we tend to find it difficult to share what's going wrong? Are we ashamed of events that are beyond our control? Do we somehow think that we're lesser people for not constantly having everything sorted? Is it just me, or are we all feeling like we're the only one who hasn't got it all together and are embarrassed to make it public that we haven't worked out how to do life?

A life that is just focussed on being happy is a life that is missing much richness – grief, sadness, anger and fear may not be pleasant to experience, but those emotions are often a counterpoint of love and the contrast certainly make us enjoy happiness all the more. Focussing on being happy also ignores the fact that bad things happen. I know that you've all had bad things happen to you, difficult experiences and troubled times because you're all alive. Somehow we have to deal with those parts of our lives as well as the comfortable and easy times.

Part of dealing with bad things that happen, is being honest with each other and with God about how we're feeling. When bad things are happening, we can't pretend that everything's OK, that we're fine when we're not – we end up falling apart sooner or later and/or rejecting God.

I've been brought hard up against this one. I suspect that if I believed in the prosperity gospel, I'd no longer be a Christian. Most of you will know that my marriage failed for the second time this year – same marriage, fallen apart twice. The first time, 5 and a half years ago, I was

particularly angry with God – I believe that Andy was the man that God called me to marry, so when things went wrong, I felt like everything I believed in was wrong. And I was so angry with God for putting me in that position – I did what God told me to do and ended up in a nightmare. A friend asked me how I could be angry with God – I didn't have a choice. The anger and hurt was overwhelming.

With time, I came to understand that God has a longer perspective than me. As Andy and I resolved our issues, I came to understand that God didn't call me to marry Andy to have an easy and comfortable life, but because we would work through our issues together and be better off afterwards. That understanding got shattered in January this year when Andy told me that he wanted to end our marriage and see other people – and promptly got on with it. So how do I understand this in terms of God's calling? Did I get it all wrong? Did God? In February, Bishop Justin, who inspired this sermon series, gave us a great demonstration that allowed me to make sense of this. Let me show you:

Bishop Justin placed 3 people – **A**                      **B**                      **C**  
And a fourth person

**D**

He put forward that God is trying to get person A to point C, only problem being that A cannot see C because B is an obstacle in the way. So God calls A towards D. As A gets close to D, everything falls apart and A is left wondering what's happened. As the grief clears though, A is finally able to see C and God can call A towards C at last.

Can you see that it's not that you're getting it wrong when it all falls apart, just that you're still going through a journey towards where you need to go. So now, I am waiting for God's new calling. If God calls me to marry someone else, it's fair to say that I'll be wanting confirmation of that calling and it will take a lot of courage to follow that call. Although I have no idea what God will bring from this situation, thanks to what happened last time, I have complete faith in God having the long view and making something good come out of it. I don't believe that God causes suffering - I don't believe that He wanted me to marry Andy just so it could all fall apart twice and make me stronger. I believe that God wanted me to marry Andy because it had the potential to bring out the best in both of us. Unfortunately, we both have free will. I do believe though, that God will take this, and any other crisis and do what He can to build us up from it. Assuming that we're willing of course...

Before all this happened, I could never understand how the psalmists could cry out about how bad their lives were and how much they resented what God was putting them through, and yet, at the end of that, praise God. Like in Psalm 69 where David talks about being in trouble up to his neck. This was a man favoured by God – a man after God's own heart - who felt besieged by enemies, rejected and mocked by all. He turns it around though and ends by praising God – making a decision to keep trusting and glorifying God. It is a conscious decision to turn to God. Our feelings may be beyond our control, but our decisions, our actions - they are our choice. I've lived it now, so I can also say, "How could you do this to me God?" as well as, "I will

continue to trust and praise you God". That is our individual decision – to take all crises and bad times to God and to continue to trust and worship Him despite how we feel.

I suspect that sometimes we try and cover up things with God – we know that God knows everything, and yet we act like we can keep our deepest, darkest fears and feelings from Him. We act like we can only present the best of ourselves to God. I believe that God would rather I was honest than a sycophant. I also suspect that that's one of the problems when crises happen – we pretend that it's not so bad – God has it all in hand so it's going to be OK. Well, yes, I am going to be OK, but I'll still end up a divorcee, and my kids will now always come from a broken home. That really upsets me – so don't tell me it's going to be OK, don't try to fix it because you can't. Cry with me instead. Because that's how we deal with grief as a community.

When Jesus saw his friends weeping at the death of their mutual friend Lazarus, he wept too. It's not a bad example to follow. The way that our brains work mean that our emotions need validating before we can think clearly. When we're feeling angry and upset, we need to have that acknowledged – for someone to say, "I can see that you're really upset and I can see why." You don't necessarily need to think that the emotion is a correct response – just acknowledge that that's the feeling present. When my friend is having a tough time with a colleague at work, what do you think is my best approach? To go straight to telling her what she ought to have done differently? There's no point in doing that before I've listened to her and commiserated with her. Apparently men tend to have more trouble with this concept... It's not about fixing the problem – some problems can't be fixed. It's about journeying through the upset together.

Think about a time when you were upset and someone tried to tell you what you could have done to avoid the situation – was that helpful? No? No. Crying, lamenting, commiserating with each other, listening to what's going on – once that's done, and emotional equilibrium is reached, then we can move forward and start thinking again. One third of the psalms, the Bible's hymnbook, are laments. What percentage of the songs we sing are laments? We need to get better at sharing the bad times, the grief, we need to cry with each other. And crying with each other has two parts – the person who is willing to be vulnerable and cry, and any others who make it safe to do so by being willing to listen and empathize. Once we start being honest and vulnerable, then this becomes a safe space for everyone to be honest and vulnerable.

We need learn to be honest about how we feel with ourselves, each other and God. Giving testimony not just about how things are going well, but about our struggles. Trying to do life in our own strength allows no room for God to work out His plans for us and in us. It is only in admitting to our vulnerabilities and weakness that we allow God's grace to move among us. So the next time you ask someone, "How are you?", be ready to listen to and empathize with the answer, and the next time you're asked, "How are you?" try being honest – share what you're comfortable with sharing. You might be surprised by what happens.

Kia kaha.