

Lamentations 3:22-33

Bishop Mike visited the Cathedral this morning and we talked about Bishop Lee. Most of you know, I think, that Bishop Lee has been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. It is a challenging illness and the treatment is also very challenging. Bishop Lee has risen to that challenge in an extraordinary way. Reflecting on his experience he has spoken of the fact that he has discovered that his faith is deeply sustaining and that, put to the test, he discovered reserves of hope. He has faced the bad news and the trials that followed squarely, discussed them, reflected on them; digested his experience, and found strength and courage to carry on.

I start with Bishop Lee, because tonight we heard a reading that explores the business of what we do in a crisis. The background to our first reading, from Lamentations, was a crisis. Now, I am just back from Spain and from visiting churches. In the third or fourth church my wife asked me why so much of what we were looking at was built in the Sixteenth Century. Well, that was an invitation I could not resist and I started to tell her about Moorish settlement and the Reconquista of the Catholic Kings. Then I noticed a slightly patient expression and knew that once again, there was too much history. There have been history lessons before at Evensong. I need to be brief this time. In August 587 BC, on 9th day of the Jewish month of Ab, a Babylonian army that had been besieging Jerusalem for eighteen months broke through the walls and put the city to the torch. It was carnage. The Jewish king, Zedekiah, made a run for Jericho but was captured. The Babylonians murdered his sons in front of him and promptly put his eyes out. Then, Zedekiah and thousands of others were deported to Babylon, in chains. Jerusalem was left for the poor and it was left a ruin. The palace was burnt, the walls were leveled and the Temple was destroyed. The Ark of the Covenant was never seen again. The hope and glory and faith of Israel was in ruins.

You can read bits of the story in the Second Book of Kings and the Second Book of Chronicles. It is one of the stories of the Old Testament, the beginning of the exile and the tipping point for the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And then there is another book, unlike the others, that also focusses on this moment. The Book of Lamentations, five short poems written amid the ruins of a city:

Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place
Lamentations 1:3

In Lamentations, Jerusalem is described as if she is a woman that has sinned, a woman punished

Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; her downfall was appalling, with none to comfort her. "O LORD, look at my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!"
Lamentations 1:9

What we hear is a sustained outpouring of grief:

He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes... I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the LORD." The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.
Lamentations 3:16-20

Only once does the mood shift, for a few brief verses, the verses we heard read tonight. Suddenly there is a renewed confidence in God; some hope for the future

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness...

This change of tone lasts but a moment, after a few verses the old grief returns,

Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace! Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens...
Lamentations 5:1-4

This is not a very familiar book of the bible. The choir – especially the choir men know it because texts from Lamentations have been famously set to music and are sung in Holy Week, there is even a special service built around them, called *Tenebrae*. One of the high points of the liturgical year from me is the singing of the Tallis Lamentations on the Wednesday in Holy Week. That apart this is not a voice we hear often.

And that is perhaps a shame, because there is something important going on here. It is all to do with how we handle tragedy and grief. There is a bit of a row going at the moment about what we are going to say next year when we start remembering the Great War. Mr. Cameron is on record saying that he hopes for 'A commemoration that, like the Diamond Jubilee celebrations... says something about who we are as a people'. Jeremy Paxman promptly went into argumentative mode and said 'Only a moron would celebrate war'. The British Legion are concerned we will treat the War as a series of defeats and historians are arguing about the competence or incompetence of military leadership. This is an argument about *how* you remember and about *what* you remember. It started before the war was over and it got powerfully expressed in the poem Sassoon wrote when he saw the Menin Gate, the vast war memorial to those who died at Ypres and who have no marked grave,

*Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims...*

*Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.*

There are two basic temptations when we face tragedy, they are before us now in Syria, they are before us in the holocaust, they are there amongst the drowned bodies of migrants in the Mediterranean and in countless other scenes of crime and they are before us in our homes when we are bereaved or face pain and despair. There is a temptation to despair and there is a temptation to hurry on.

Tragedy puts us to the test. For some it is a place they never leave, it consumes them, it holds them fast. For others it is a thing you must not contemplate – a place you should never visit at all. Both, in their different ways, are defeated by a tragedy they cannot accommodate in their thinking. It becomes a thing that will not sit alongside other experiences of happiness, hope or confidence. Lamentations takes a different line. Lamentations insists you must stare defeat and agony in the face and find the words for it. Lamentations says that and we heard in tonight's reading that you must look for the beginnings of hope and redemption in the midst of all that mess. Faith is not pie in the sky when you die; faith is honest, courageous and determined. You tell the story as it is and, the worse it is, the more you know that God alone can redeem what seems senseless and vile. As Lamentations has it:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning;

We tell the truth, we face the challenge, we look for hope. It is a hard thing to do. Lamentations is not an easy read and there is a swathe of pain and a good deal that sounds like despair. There is also an abiding conviction that this is where you start when trouble breaks. Talking about Bishop Lee this morning, both Bishop Mike and I wondered if we would find within us the courage and hope Lee has found. Some of us have faced the great test and know the answer to that question, some of us do not. As we wonder however, we heard, tonight, a reminder that we are called to honesty before God. We should begin always, by facing the truth. We have no right to talk about redemption until we have told the truth about the mess we are in. We will not be redeemed if we forget how to hope.