

## Wednesday February 17 Psalm 137- a community lament

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
- 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,
- 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.
- 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.
- 7 Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"
- 8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—
- 9 he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

Do you remember the 1978 hit single *Rivers of Babylon* by Boney M? Don't worry, I wouldn't dream of trying to sing it. It comes from the opening words of Psalm 137, every line of it alive with pain. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept". Israel has been invaded, the temple destroyed, the people forced into exile in a foreign land far away, their captors making fun of them. All they can do is pour their distress into a song, waiting and longing for the day they can go home again and be free.

It's not the only psalm where you find the Israelites crying out in pain in the face of some disaster, whether it be military defeat, captivity or plague. These aren't the kind of psalms you want to sing if you feel happy and you want to shout with joy. But they come into their own when a whole nation, or, as now, the whole world, is struck down by a pandemic. People are desperately sick, hospitals are full, medical staff are exhausted.

So much that we took for granted has disappeared, and we don't know if it will ever return. It's a kind of bereavement. When you're bereaved, you need to mourn, to express your pain and your fear for the future. And when you can't find your own words to describe how you feel, it's psalms like this one, with its opening howl of pain that come alive in a new way ("By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept"). We do need to lament, and we need words like this to do it. These words of lament are given to us by the living God Himself, inviting us to use them to pour out, in anger if that's how we feel, strong emotions back to Him.

In the first week of Lent 2021, I've chosen LAMENT rather than REPENT as a daily theme. But we won't stay there, paralysed by pain and fear. We've a journey to undertake. LAMENT is the starting point, RESURRECTION is the destination and we'll come to this at Easter and the days beyond. On the way, in the next few weeks, we'll arrive at different points, to stop and explore some other themes – FEAR, REPENTANCE, THANKSGIVING, PERSEVERANCE and HOPE.

But we're still at the start, thinking about LAMENT. You can always choose your own words of lament to talk to God about how everything that's going on has affected you. If you don't feel comfortable doing that, look through the psalms in your bible or your prayer book. Choose one that appeals to you, and read it out loud. You won't be reading in an empty room; you'll be reading it back to its divine author. He will hear and he will listen.

## Thursday February 18

## Psalm 42 – a personal lament

- 1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?
- 3 My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
- 4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.
- 5 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and
- 6 my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.
- 8 By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me— a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?”
- 10 My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
- 11 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Today, another psalm of LAMENT - Psalm 42. It starts like this: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. “ If you followed yesterday’s suggestion of choosing a psalm of lament to shout out to God, it might have been this one. If you can think back to the last time you were in a church service, you might have sung it, or one of the hymns based on it, such as “As pants the hart for cooling streams” or “As the deer pants for the water”.

I chose yesterday’s psalm as a way for us all to lament – a community lament, if you like. But your sorrows can also be intensely personal. Psalm 42 comes from the lips of someone a long way from home and community, from family and friends, and he keeps complaining, “Why do I go about mourning?”

There are times when I feel like that. My wife and I are blessed with good friends and neighbours, and we can get together with them, sort of, thanks to Zoom – one of those words that’s come into its own recently. But our family is in Yorkshire, and we haven’t seen them since Christmas 2019. That’s 14 months ago now. When *will* we able to see them again? We just don’t know. We are so sad about this; and millions of other people are in the same position, feeling just the same as us.

So if this rings bells with you today, and you are painfully aware of being separated from those you love, perhaps this psalm will help you put it all into words. So open your bible again and read it – read it out loud – with feeling. Don’t be embarrassed!

If you do, you might be struck by the closing words: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” Yes, things *will* change, we just don’t know when. In the bible, passages of lament often end on

a note of hope. That's important because it helps us not to fall into pits of self-pity that we can't climb out of. But we'll have to wait, and come back to that – to the theme of HOPE - further on in this journey through Lent 2021.

**Friday February 19**

**Lamentations 3:16-26 - waiting**

16 He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.

17 I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is.

18 So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD."

19 I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

20 I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.

21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

24 I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

25 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;

26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

The Book of Lamentations does what it says on the tin. It's a lament. On Ash Wednesday I started this series with Psalm 137, picturing traumatised, exiled, ridiculed Israelites frogmarched to a foreign country far away, pictures of slaughter and destruction permanently seared into their memories, No wonder they were full of lament.

Lamentations follows the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. It has 154 verses, full of word pictures that describe terrible scenes of suffering and destruction. It also puts into words the despair and the trauma that these people were going through, such a long way from home and not knowing if they would ever be able to return. But here in the middle of Lamentations chapter 3 it's a bit like a hurricane: it has a still, small centre.

A few quiet verses reveal three things worth hanging on to: THE COMPASSIONATE LOVE OF GOD; THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE and THE CHALLENGE OF WAITING. Listen to this:

"Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." "

As we journey together through Lent, a pandemic making us exiles in our own homes, this Book of Lamentations reminds us of the same 3 things to hang on to: THE COMPASSIONATE LOVE OF GOD; THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE and THE CHALLENGE OF WAITING.

Today, let's think about waiting. Waiting for things to get back to some sort of normality, with something we can begin to call freedom. In the meantime we wait and it's not easy. I've had my first dose of vaccine; I still have to wait another 9 weeks for the second dose. My wife had to wait for a couple of weeks longer for her first jab. It's hard, all this waiting.

I've heard lots of suggestions about what we can do while we wait: taking up a new hobby, for example. Yes, that's not a bad idea! But here's something else. Lots of psalms talk about waiting, and one of them says this: "Trust in the Lord and do good". In other words, keep looking *up* and keep looking *out*. As you wait, is there something you can do to help someone else? Even if you can't get out there's no need to feel this doesn't apply to you. Give someone a call. Write them a letter or send a card. It may not seem much to you. But it might mean the world to them.

## Saturday February 20 Genesis 23:1-20 - bereavement

1 Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old.

2 She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.

3 Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said,

4 "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead."

From the books of Psalms and Lamentations we move on today to something different. If you know Genesis, the opening book of the bible well, you might still have forgotten about an event recorded in chapter 23. I'm struck by the brief and matter-of-fact way just two verses record a huge event in Abraham's life. His wife Sarah died. Abraham mourned. He wept for her. Then he went out to buy a burial plot. As simple as that.

Connect it to your own experience of the death of someone you loved and were close to, and you will know only too well the sorrow these verses from Genesis only hint at. The pandemic, with its enforced separations, has made times of death and bereavement even worse.

In March of last year, paramedic Jonathan Newell volunteered to work on the respiratory ward at Craigavon Area Hospital here in Northern Ireland. He contracted Covid-19, along with a number of family members including his mother Martina. The staff brought Jonathan's and Martina's beds side-by-side in the intensive care unit. Martina died. "I took her hand and told her we loved her and within about 10 minutes she passed away peacefully" Jonathan later recalled on BBC Ulster television news.

Too ill to leave hospital, he watched her funeral on a computer screen. "I couldn't grieve in the hospital" he said, "I couldn't take part with my family at home in the grieving process ... I couldn't be there to support them over the time of the wake, of the funeral, the burial ... And to me, it wasn't real".

I tell this story not because it was exceptional, but because it *wasn't*. So many have died in hospitals and care homes with family members unable to be with them; funerals took place with mere handfuls of mourners. I think of two friends of mine who both died after periods in hospital in the months before the pandemic broke. I am not alone in being glad that both died when they did. Their loved ones were with them at their bedsides. A few months later and that would have been impossible.

It is so easy to delude ourselves into thinking that "they'll soon get over it". Almost certainly they won't, whether Christians or not. These are truly life-changing experiences that take us on journeys through very dark valleys.

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" urges Paul in Romans ch. 12. It might be impossible to visit people we love who have been bereaved. Which makes it all the more important to write, to get on the phone or link up on Zoom. What if you don't know what to say? Perhaps that doesn't matter very much. What is more important is that you do it.

**Monday February 22**

**2 Samuel 18:19-19:8a – moving on**

**19** Now Ahimaaz son of Zadok said, “Let me run and take the news to the king that the LORD has delivered him from the hand of his enemies.”

**20** “You are not the one to take the news today,” Joab told him. “You may take the news another time, but you must not do so today, because the king’s son is dead.”

**21** Then Joab said to a Cushite, “Go, tell the king what you have seen.” The Cushite bowed down before Joab and ran off.

**22** Ahimaaz son of Zadok again said to Joab, “Come what may, please let me run behind the Cushite.” But Joab replied, “My son, why do you want to go? You don’t have any news that will bring you a reward.”

**23** He said, “Come what may, I want to run.” So Joab said, “Run!” Then Ahimaaz ran by way of the plain and outran the Cushite.

**24** While David was sitting between the inner and outer gates, the watchman went up to the roof of the gateway by the wall. As he looked out, he saw a man running alone.

**25** The watchman called out to the king and reported it. The king said, “If he is alone, he must have good news.” And the man came closer and closer.

**26** Then the watchman saw another man running, and he called down to the gatekeeper, “Look, another man running alone!” The king said, “He must be bringing good news, too.”

**27** The watchman said, “It seems to me that the first one runs like Ahimaaz son of Zadok.” “He’s a good man,” the king said. “He comes with good news.”

**28** Then Ahimaaz called out to the king, “All is well!” He bowed down before the king with his face to the ground and said, “Praise be to the LORD your God! He has delivered up the men who lifted their hands against my lord the king.”

**29** The king asked, “Is the young man Absalom safe?” Ahimaaz answered, “I saw great confusion just as Joab was about to send the king’s servant and me, your servant, but I don’t know what it was.”

**30** The king said, “Stand aside and wait here.” So he stepped aside and stood there.

**31** Then the Cushite arrived and said, “My lord the king, hear the good news! The LORD has delivered you today from all who rose up against you.”

**32** The king asked the Cushite, “Is the young man Absalom safe?” The Cushite replied, “May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man.”

**33** The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!”

**1** Joab was told, “The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.”

**2** And for the whole army the victory that day was turned into mourning, because on that day the troops heard it said, “The king is grieving for his son.”

**3** The men stole into the city that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle.

**4** The king covered his face and cried aloud, “O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!”

**5** Then Joab went into the house to the king and said, “Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines.

**6** You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead.

**7** Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the LORD that if you don’t go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come upon you from your youth till now.”

**8** So the king got up and took his seat in the gateway.

In the last week of January, the United Kingdom passed a grim milestone. The news on the Tuesday of that week announced that over 100,000 people had died of Coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. At that stage, the total was rising by over one thousand each day. Thankfully, this number is now falling. Each time someone reminds us that behind the statistics, each death involves a real person, a grieving family and sorrowing friends, we are remembering something hugely important.

Last Saturday I talked about the death of Abraham's wife Sarah. He wept. He grieved for her. He bought a piece of land in which to bury her body. A few short words, leaving us to imagine his grief. Today, another passage, this time from 2 Samuel chapters 18 and 19, tells of the death of King David's son Absalom. Not a supportive wife this time, but a rebellious son, killed in a battle with David's loyal forces, in an uprising in which he nearly succeeded in deposing his father to make himself King Absalom.

Abraham grieved for Sarah in her death; David must have grieved for Absalom in his life. So, we might excuse him for being glad to see the back of a son who brought him so much misery. But what we see is precisely the opposite – a king inconsolable in his grief. 2 Samuel says this:

"... for the whole army the victory that day was turned into mourning, because on that day the troops heard it said, "The king is grieving for his son.""

One of his commanders, Joab, went to see him. You might think he wanted to sympathise. Not a bit of it. He tore strips off him.

"I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead."

That's no way to talk to someone who has just been bereaved surely? Especially your king! Wasn't he ashamed of himself?

However understandable it might be to be shocked by Joab's attitude, it does point to something that's really important. There are still things to be done; not just the daily task of getting out of bed and fixing some breakfast. It could be that life during this pandemic is summoning us to fresh tasks, new challenges, even for those who have lost loved ones in the past few months.

And what was David's reaction to Joab's dressing down? No, he didn't have him executed for his impertinence. He accepted his commander's rebuke. I'm sure it wasn't easy, but he rose to the challenge. Good for him!

**Tuesday February 23**

**1 Samuel 16 – the music that soothes**

**14** Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.

**15** Saul's attendants said to him, "See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you.

**16** Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, and you will feel better."

**17** So Saul said to his attendants, "Find someone who plays well and bring him to me."

**18** One of the servants answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him."

**19** Then Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me your son David, who is with the sheep."

**20** So Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them with his son David to Saul.

**21** David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers.

**22** Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, "Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him."

**23** Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

Even if you are not a great fan of William Shakespeare, you can almost certainly remember a few of his most famous lines. How about this one? 'If music be the food of love, play on'. That's the opening line from his comedy *Twelfth Night*. Lovesick Orsino is in love with Countess Olivia but she's not interested. So he asks for more music, hoping it might cure his obsession with love, in the way that eating too much removes your appetite for food. He's right on at least one count: music is good for you! It cheers you up. So today, instead of more on LAMENT, let's think about music, as a bit of light relief.

First of all, let's go back very briefly to the Old Testament – this time to 1 Samuel 16. King Saul is having some very bad days; he's oppressed by evil spirits. So like Orsino, he wants some music to cheer him up. His servants know about a lad called David who plays the harp. So they bring David in. Every time Saul has a bad day, David gets his harp out, and it seems to work. Yes, music helps cheer you up.

Do you know what the latest sensation in the music world is? It's not some new spectacular young superstar who looks great on screen. It's Martin Waitt, 82 years old, with white hair and a bushy beard, looking for all the world like an old sea dog! And do you know what he sings? He sings ... *sea shanties*! And one of them is called the *Covid Shanty*. If you can imagine what a sea shanty sounds like, imagine him singing this:

"Soon may the nurses come / to stick a vaccine in your arm / and one day when the jabbin' is done / that bug will leave and go"

Wonderful stuff, these sea shanties! Me though, I love classical music. And every winter, I listen to all the symphonies of Gustav Mahler. Next one on the list will be his fifth. If you're not feeling the best today, think about something on the radio or your CD player that would cheer you up, go and put it on. You could also look for an online choir to join. Whatever you decide to do, then, with apologies to William Shakespeare, 'If music be the food of cheer, listen on.'