

## 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021, Third Sunday of Lent: 'A Sorrowful journey' (Ex 3, Ps 13, John 11:20-36)

Some years ago while we were in London, our church received the distressing news that an ex-church member had tragically died. Many of us knew this person well, and many tears were shed: but something that struck me at the time, and which I still recall many years later is one of my friends, who is one of the most inspirational Christians I know, responding to the news by saying: 'this will be one of those nights when I go and shout at God.'

This was a revelation to me. Surely Christians didn't do that kind of thing: that was for atheists, right? And it's not that I didn't know the psalms: I used them every day, including all the ones which did just that, railing at God for injustice and suffering in the world. I think I'd always assumed that this kind of language was meant symbolically, not literally: as Christians we didn't actually go and do that kind of thing ourselves!

Over the years, I've come to realise that all the psalms are in the bible for a reason. And whilst we always approach God in humility, **there is a place in our faith for lamenting, for asking God why.** And in this week in our journey of Worship in the Wilderness for Lent we face the difficult question: how do we process all those negative feelings: the anger, the sorrow, the big 'why' questions?

Perhaps this year of all years we need to do that. And somehow we have to involve God in the pain, to square it with our faith. So in these few minutes I want to revisit our passages and share 3 very simple observations which help us to lament during our season in the wilderness:

**First, God sees our pain.** This is the starting point for that iconic passage where God meets Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3. We all know the first bit: Moses sees a strange fire, goes over to check it out, and finds out that he's actually encountering the living God! But we usually end at v6, though what comes *next* is what prompts this encounter in the first place – look at v7: 'I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt.' God meets Moses because he sees our suffering. He's not blind, or neglectful: he sees human suffering and it matters to him: 'I am concerned' God says: which is not a politician's answer, but a real one. God sees, and he's affected by it.

Which leads us to the second very simple observation: **God feels.** This is implicit in the passage in Exodus but made much more explicit by the famous story of Jesus raising Lazarus. Here we see Jesus expressing strong emotions over the death of his friend: he's indignant (which is the literal meaning of the word translated as 'deeply moved'), then he's troubled and finally he weeps. His emotion is so obvious that those around are moved to comment: 'See how he loved him!'

And we too can hear the same voice of God in our troubles: see how he loves us! God is not an impassive observer of his world: our sorrow is his. There was an old tradition which interpreted the Old Testament words of God – 'no-one may see my face and live' – as being because no-one could witness the depth of pain and sorrow on God's face: such a vision would truly overwhelm us. I don't know if that's theologically justifiable, but no-one can read the story of Jesus and Lazarus and conclude that God doesn't care. God weeps for human suffering: and he weeps because he loves.

So lament is worthwhile because God sees our suffering and he feels our pain. But let's finally note that **God also hears**: God hears our cries and prayers. God *heard* the Israelites crying out, in fact he says it twice in that passage. Jesus *heard* the cries of Martha and Mary and it moved him. And now God hears us too. For our prayers today we'll be using Psalm 13, a great psalm of lament, and I commend it to you. The psalmist pulls no punches: v1 begins: 'How long, Lord?' Many of us may be crying the same at present. 'How long will you hide your face? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts? How long will my enemy triumph over me?'

The psalmist demands an answer: and we too can come to God trusting in the fact that he hears and he *will* answer. Not always as we expect, or when we expect – that alone is God's – but he does, and will. And note how the psalm ends: having poured his or her lament, the psalmist is able to trust again: 'I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.'

You may ask: how does the psalmist swing so quickly? But the point is: airing our feelings, downloading what's in our hearts to God, allows us to return to a place of trust more quickly. That's why we need lament. Without lament as part of our spiritual diet we can easily conclude that God doesn't care about suffering, or lead a double life which exudes public joy but private despair. **To lament is to affirm God's fundamental goodness and love, otherwise why lament?**

So, hard as it is, can I encourage us all to embrace the sorrow of our journey? To trust that God is good enough and loving enough to hear our cries. God sees. God feels. God hears and answers. Let's take our cares to him today: and may God wipe every tear from our eyes and place his peace and rest in our hearts again. Amen.

*Our song of response will be new to most of you, but allows us to lament today. Please listen and when the song breaks in the middle, do use the words on the screen to pour out your own words to God...*