

Lamentation and Hope

Luke Ch 1

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people,
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us;
⁷² to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, ⁷⁴ to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ through the tender mercy of our God,
when the day shall dawn upon^{us} us from on high
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Introduction

Refer to Dan's talk from the community anniversary weekend.

Sadly, we weren't able to be at the weekend away – so sorry to miss that opportunity to re-connect with you all after our three years in Oman. Dan asked me to give my own response on the theme of his talk; Lamentation and hope as a response to God in times of trouble. At least I got some enforced rest and time to think.

A few other things have happened in the meantime that have helped me reflect in the last couple of weeks while I've been preparing for this:

Obviously, there was the Queen's funeral and the once in a lifetime things that happened – those corporate outpourings of sorrow and demonstrations of mourning that people would never usually perform. People queuing through the night to pay respects was the most notable. The scale of the ceremonial processions, glorious church services, and accolades from all over the world were a vivid picture of corporate lamentation – and lamentation with HOPE. We saw the combination of grieving and celebration, sorrow and thanksgiving, reflection on the past and prayers and hope for the future king's reign and what it might mean for this nation.

There were plenty of things that resonated with what Dan said about finding hope in times of grief, reflecting on the promises of scripture that in ALL things God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purposes. (Rom 8.28) The death of Elizabeth II was a great opportunity to recall her faith and witness. It brought people together in new ways. One person said that they joined the queue as an individual but left it as part of a family. For a few days people from all walks, politicians and world leaders, great and small, young and old, set aside differences and stood together. Even those who don't agree with the institution of monarchy showed respect for the passing of a great woman, and many hailed her Christ like humility acknowledging that the source of her strength was her trust in God.

Some other things have happened to me since, much more mundane – but experiences which still provide parables and insights into our need for faith and hope.

There was the afternoon spent on the phone, ploughing through all automated keypad options, then hanging on the phone waiting for the hard-working Government helpline operatives to answer with no idea how long it will take, and then after half an hour accidentally hitting the hang up button and having to start all over again. I guess I DID have hope that my call would eventually be answered, but the temptation to give up was real, especially as unlike prayer to God, I didn't have the confidence that they would deliver even when I did get through.

Then I hurt my foot, I dropped a cup on it, and went to Ealing Hospital Urgent Treatment Centre along with the mass of humanity in various states of distress – and waited nearly 4 hours, since their need was clearly greater than mine. But this IS the NHS and you know you WILL be seen eventually – but how long, O Lord?!. I had plenty of time to reflect on waiting

for God to act in the midst of pain, whilst the suffering of those around me brought some perspective to my own predicament.

Dealing with a pain in the foot was a good reminder of how hard it is to see clearly, or think of anything else, let alone write a talk, when one bit of your body is yelling for attention and relief. It reminded me to be more empathetic towards those who are hurting, and to admit that yes, it IS incredibly difficult to see the mountain of God's love and eternal purposes when the molehill of my immediate troubles are right in my face (or tormenting my foot)

One passage of scripture that has given me inspiration whilst thinking about hope in hard times has been the song of Zechariah from Luke chapter 1. It's the words of a man who had been struck dumb for months on end, as judgment for his failure to believe and trust in God's promises. But he saw the start of the fulfilment of Gabriel's words of hope when Elizabeth his aging wife gave birth to a son. Zechariah's words of obedience, naming him, John, was the moment of release as his song of faith came pouring out. That song, which is sometimes called the Benedictus, from the Latin for 'Blessed be", the first words he uttered, has been feeding me with hope so I'm sharing a few truths I have got out of it which I think are pertinent for us in this season.

*⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people,
⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,*

Zechariah praises God for what he HAS done

In the midst of hardship, it is crucial that we rest on the facts – in fact we put our faith in the facts and the feelings follow – or may follow – but even if the feelings don't follow, the facts remain – GOD HAS ACTED. He has visited us, got off his throne and become one of us, paid the price for us, his mighty saving work is written in history and in the genealogy of real people, and God has kept his promises as he said he would. Jesus became my saviour before I ever did anything to deserve it and before I even put my faith in him. And whether or not I feel it or believe in this moment makes no difference at all to the fact that God has acted, saved me and loves me still. It's what marks Christianity out from all other major religions – being about what God has done for us – not resting on what WE do to attain salvation, peace, eternal life or whatever you are seeking. There is great power in daily acclaiming the truth of God's salvation however you feel when you get out of bed, and whatever you face and however you fail by the time you hit your bed again tonight. It's not false or hypocritical to declare the truth if you don't feel it. In fact it is a shield of faith which will defend you from the fiery arrows that assault us.

The very act of praying is an act of faith even when you don't feel like you believe it.. Dan talked about the Psalms of Lamentation – and right at the heart of the collection is Psalm 88 – the only one which doesn't end with any declaration of hope and faith at all – and yet it is there, it wasn't edited out, and it is to be used in our prayers and gives hope to all who feel that way. The good thing about Ps 88 is that it STARTS with a declaration of truth even if it

seems to end with no hope. "O Lord God of my deliverance" he cries out, then plunges into his litany of sorrows.

Even when our feelings OR our faith fail – GOD is faithful.

*70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
72 to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,*

The context of God's act of salvation is his promise, his holy covenant, his steadfast love which never fails. Dan went into some detail about this 'Hesed' – the almost untranslatable and amazing loving kindness, faithfulness from a God willing to stake the life of his Son on keeping his promise. God's saving action in our lives doesn't come out of nowhere, or in an arbitrary way; it is based on a relationship with us which God has initiated and pursued in spite of our failure and rejection. And in that relationship, as in those Psalms of Lamentation, knowing what God has promised and knowing that his love is steadfast and will never reject us, we can have courage to be real – very real, very raw, very honest, unashamed in our approach to God without trying to preserve our self-respect, letting it all hang out, laying it all on the altar before the Lord.

There's a common theme in those Psalms which I'd like to explore more, though. Not just how the Psalmist feels but the reason for it – we have enemies! Zechariah's understanding of deliverance is described as a rescue mission:

*71 that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us;
74 we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies*

Deliverance from enemies – In the Psalms that might mean enemies who are foreign invaders, or those who are obviously wicked, with no fear of God; or it may be those who the Psalmist thought was his friends, even his closest most trusted confidante – with the inevitable sense of outrage and betrayal that results, and the emotional scars that take longer to heal than any physical wound. When someone you thought you could trust lets you down, be it a family member, youth worker, spiritual leader, especially those you admired; it's probably worse than persecution and outright opposition, or the violence of war.

Even in those circumstances we are encouraged to have hope, and what's more Jesus asks us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, not to sink to their level or feed the fire of bitterness.

But who is the real enemy? In the light of the coming of Christ we know that the final enemy is death, and Jesus has defeated it in his resurrection. Jesus own death on the cross dealt with the sin that leads to death, so that we don't need to live in the fear of death anymore. We are, however, still living in a battle. St Paul also reminds us that our struggle is not with flesh and blood but the spiritual powers that oppose us. Satan will try to steal our hope and turn our anger and blame on one another to destroy our community life.

Honest lamentation is good, but in opening our hearts to God we also should be open to his open heart surgery; revealing where we might be sinking into self pity, or seeking to blame and get retribution, and perhaps convicting us of where we are contributing to the problem.

The Lord is always, always, longing to give us the grace to forgive as well as the grace of being forgiven, remembering Jesus stern warning about the way unforgiveness undermines our own relationship with God as well as others.

God longs to heal; it is in his nature, his tender mercy. Sometimes he heals by giving us a fresh perspective, new insight into a situation and compassion for those who have hurt us. For example, realising that they also are hurting and carrying baggage. It helps to focus our lamentation and prayer when we recognise who is the real enemy here, and that as Christian brothers and sisters we are fighting on the same side – or should be – not fighting one another.

Yes, we will fail one another, but the real enemy, Satan, our accuser, will try to turn that into hatred, resentment, bitterness, disillusionment, blame and shame of one another and of ourselves. Those are the things that will be the death of community. The name 'devil' or 'diabolos' come from the word meaning to divide or tear apart. Let's be on the look out for things that divide and attack our unity as the family of God.

Lamentation honestly tells God how we feel about being damaged, but don't let Satan twist that right & proper grief into self pity which can fester our wounds instead of healing them. Turn the energy of your anger into spiritual warfare in prayers that send evil packing – especially prayers of protection over our young people's hearts and minds.

And channel your grief into actions that put things right in our relationships; asking forgiveness, reaching out in love, and practical stuff like getting our policies and teaching in shape to protect the vulnerable and encourage the weak – to build a community of love which casts out fear. We have work to do, with God's help, to strengthen our foundations. AS St Paul says in 2 Cor 7.10 Godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation, leaving no regret, but worldly sorrow leads to death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you, what earnestness, eagerness to clear yourselves, indignation, alarm, longing and concern, readiness to see justice done.

We are saved for a purpose, life in all its fullness – And it is what Satan is trying to undermine by proliferating fear and mistrust.

YES we will let each other down. I will let you down. Look around you at your brothers and sisters; even those you most admire and love will let you down. We do not rely on other people being perfect – if you do then that is a recipe for chronic anxiety. If my hope lies in me never failing I'm doomed from the start.

In my younger days, before marriage, during that time of finding my way in life and longing for the 'right person' to share it with, I got let down and hurt. God gave me a picture which

really helped me. It was of circus trapeze artists: they swing high above the ground and fly through the air trusting the person on the other side to catch them. Only with trust and confidence in the other can they experience the exhilaration of the performance. But there is always the day when someone fails, and someone else falls. Yet they know that the safety net below will catch them and save them from harm.

Now our God is SO much more than a safety net - but we CAN live our lives trusting one another and working together to put on a great display, knowing that underneath are the everlasting arms; our Father who remembers how we are made, knows our frailty, and will not allow anything to happen that he cannot use for our greater good – the God of resurrection who even let his son fall into the hands of sinners to do their worst.

We can take courage and trust again instead of being disabled by fear. We can choose to love again, and have faith in each other as well as our Lord, knowing full well that there will be times when we'll be let down, hurt and rejected, and we will make mistakes, big and small, and wound the ones we love. But nothing can take away the unconditional steadfast love of the Lord, the value we have in his eyes and the good purpose he has for our lives; Don't let the devil tell you otherwise
In the words of Zechariah God has kept his promises

*74 to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.*

Our deepest human needs for security and significance have been provided for in Jesus. The problems start when we try to find them in other things and other ways. To live out our lives serving the Lord without fear, in righteousness and holiness day by day – that has to start with knowledge of our salvation. Then we will live out the truth of God instead of being dictated to by the lies of the world, the flesh and the devil.

How do we enter that salvation? Zechariah is clear about this. His son, John the Baptist was to prepare God's people for their saviour – the way to salvation is through forgiveness.

*76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins
78 through the tender mercy of our God*

The heart of salvation is forgiveness

If we are going to lament over anything let's start with lamenting our own sin
The Church of England's historic 'Book of Common Prayer' may be old fashioned in it's language, though it was cutting edge when it was written and I'm all for modern accessible forms of worship, but newer forms have lost some of the emphasis of traditional liturgy on the seriousness of sin, and the encouragement to grieve over it.

Here are some words from the general confession;

*Almighty and most merciful father,
we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done;
And there is no health in us
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders
Spare thou, them which confess their faults, restore thou them that are penitent,
according to thy promises...*

Sin is the great leveller – all of us do it and all of us need forgiveness – the abuser and the abused, the offender and the offended. All need to kneel at the cross, and all are offered the same hope, a fresh start, clean hands, and a new identity and purpose in Christ. Jesus was deadly serious in his warnings about forgiving others as an integral part of getting our relationship with God back on track. Bitterness, revenge, cancelling and un-following are not part of the new community we are called to build. Yes there may be the need to speak the truth in love, but we do that from the position of fallible but forgiven brothers and sisters, all called to turn our faces to the light.

*78the day shall dawn upon us from on high
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

May the light of God's sunrise guide each of us out of the shadows.
Though the path to peace will look different to each of us
let's all make our way to the foot of the cross, and on our knees enlist as servants under Christ's command, fighting together against a common enemy, affirmed and equipped by his Holy Spirit, to the Glory of God the Father, Amen.

If available play song; At the cross

<https://youtu.be/1tYGTp1pHeo>