



Prayers of Lament

Although uncomfortable, the pattern of biblical lament has much to offer at this time. By Gale Richards

At the end of March 2020, the UK had entered lockdown for the first time in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and I was preparing to preach in an online Good Friday service with a local Baptist church. I felt led to preach on the theme of lament, as I wondered how well many of us would cope mentally, living with all the restrictions, loss and uncertainty we faced.

It seemed to me the psalms of lament show us how we can and must share with God, even our rawest of feelings. A practice that has the potential to aid both our spiritual and mental wellbeing. That led me to preach on a psalm of lament on Good Friday, in the hope that God would use me to offer something to the gathered congregation about the need to make space to lament, individually and corporately.

I sensed the need for lament as part of our 'walking together, and watching over one

another' as church members, but additionally to model something to the wider community, about the character of God not being distant, but present with us, in our suffering. This was a message that I felt so many in our wider community desperately needed to hear. It also resonated with the initiative I was involved in with local Baptist ministers displaying 'Try Praying' banners on our church buildings, inviting those who 'don't do church', to give prayer a try.

So, on Good Friday 2020, I preached on Psalm 22, referencing how Jesus is recorded as quoting from it in Matthew 27:46 '*...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*' (NRSV). These were words I encouraged people to hear, as a reminder that we are allowed to feel sad and cry out in our pain and suffering. There were sad things happening around us, and to us. We needed to cry out because we were hurting.

In following the pattern of biblical lament - we were to begin with a complaint addressed to God, as we reflected on and contrasted current bad times with better times; cry out for relief; and state our trust in God delivering that relief. We are able to make that last statement because we know the character of the God we serve is kind, loving, faithful and just. We are to refuse to carry the burden of repressing our pain and instead use Jesus as our model. He knew there would ultimately be a good outcome from his suffering, but that did not stop him crying out in the midst of it. We cry out as Jesus did on the cross, because it hurts!

There were positive responses to that sermon and some admissions that lamenting was not something that some had necessarily ever been taught to do, or felt comfortable doing. I had little time to reflect on how prayers of lament had become a natural part of my spirituality, before the events surrounding the killing of George Floyd in the USA, unfolded on 25 May, and gave me my answer.



Those events reminded me that I was raised by a Jamaican-born mother who passed on to me a tradition of lamenting, that stretches back generations to the enslaved African people my family descends from. I had not necessarily attached the label 'prayers of lament' to what I had grown up hearing my mum and her peers offer to God, but that is what they were. When they experienced injustice, especially racial injustice, they complained to God, as they reflected on better past times, cried out for relief, and ended with a statement confirming their trust in God to deliver that relief. Sometimes they were accompanied by words from African spiritual songs or contemporary songs, for each generation shapes the tradition for their

time and their context. I would suggest 'Hear my Cry O Lord' based on Psalm 61 has been an important accompanying song to prayers of lament, for a number of Black British people of my generation. The words within it - *When my heart is overwhelmed lead me to the rock that is higher than I* - being of particular significance.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's death, I reached out to an African-American Baptist minister back in the USA, who had spent several months worshipping with us, as she completed her PhD. I wanted her to know that we would be standing in solidarity in prayer with her and others in the USA, in the pursuit of global racial justice. She responded by sending me a poem she had come across on the theme of 'Black people are tired of trying to convince you that our Black lives matter too.' It included some of the names of the many Black lives lost, as the struggle for global racial justice continues.

I used that poem as inspiration for one of our Sunday morning services in June 2020. A service in which we explored the theme of what it means to be 'A place where all are welcome' in relation to the Good Samaritan parable. A service that also included space for two members of the congregation to share contrasting perspectives on the global Black Lives Matter protests taking place. It ended with me leading prayers inspired by the refrain in the poem 'Black people are tired,' to allow us to corporately lament, as we reflected on the global need and gospel imperative for racial justice.

As I look back on the events of 2020, I am certain prayers of lament helped sustain me.



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