

A SERMON FOR GOOD FRIDAY 2020

by Fr Bernard

Over the course of this Lent, I have been reading a weekly meditation by the Church Mission Society called *Lament for Lent*, written by Dr Cathy Ross. And as the name suggests, it is all about a much-neglected but ancient and essential aspect of prayer and worship – that of lament. The catchphrase that accompanies it, from a martyred Archbishop of Bukavu called Christophe Munzihirwa, is that “there are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried”. It is of course very appropriate, both for today, and for this time: this time both in the liturgical sense of Good Friday, and this time of Lockdown and virus, of stress and death and illness and loss.

And it strikes me that the point of today, and the theme of this booklet, both exemplify things that we have failed to do, as a Church, in response to these days, and to this Day. We have failed to understand the depths of Good Friday, and we have failed collectively to lament.

We have failed to properly acknowledge the loss, pain and grief that we are feeling, and we have failed adequately, I think, to demand of God answers. Perhaps we are frightened to appear rude, or of what those answers might be, or even that there might just be silence – which is a possibility: God does not always, or even often, speak in words we can hear, though that may in turn be because we don’t always understand the range of ways and the manner in which He responds: or the fact that sometimes He has already given us the answer to the question we are asking, before we asked it.

In yesterday’s written sermon, I wondered about how the spiritual and physical overlap. And I rambled on about it, mostly from the individual point of view, or from the intellectual and philosophical point of view of the person, the believer. But there is also an historical dimension to that question that is, for me, just as vexed, and just as pressing – in fact, given where and when we are, even more so. Not just ‘how do the material and spiritual overlap?’, but more widely, ‘how does God interact with history: how, if at all, does God intervene in human affairs?’

And that wider historical question can be phrased in a variety of ways, but one of them is simply this: “Why are these things happening?”, “What is God doing?”. Is He doing these things, or not? If not, how then are they happening, and how come God does not stop them: is God really God at all? If yes – if He is doing these things, or even just permitting them – then for heaven’s sake, why? And how can we worship Him still? These are urgent and powerful and demanding questions, and we ought to be asking them now: we ought to be shouting them!

Every year, Ash Wednesday begins our keeping of Lent, and every year, unless I get bored of it, as very occasionally I do, we hear as our first reading an excerpt from the Book of Joel, in which the clergy and people get down on their knees, put ash on their foreheads as a sign of repentance, and beg God for relief from the plague of locusts that oppresses them. This year we read it while a real plague of locusts was afflicting people in East Africa, and as I

often do, I said something about the fact that I worry about this reading: I worry that it makes God seem too much like *'the gods'* – like an irascible, unpredictable being in need of propitiation. That is what *'the gods'* are like – powerful and dangerous entities who need to be kept sweet with sacrifice and offering. They intervene repeatedly, selfishly and unpredictably in human affairs, for their own benefit and amusement, and it is sensible to keep them on-side if at all possible, and otherwise to keep your head down and keep out of their way.

That is not what God is like – our God, for whom the word God is only a potentially misleading shorthand. We have to use a word, or several, and God is perfectly fine, as a translation of various Hebrew words, names by which God is known, *'El Shaddai: Almighty'*, and *'YAHWEH: The Lord'* among them. But who God truly is, is beyond what we can know. We have the benefit of revelation – of all sorts of different kinds of revelation – by which God shows Himself to us, culminating in Jesus, of course: God taking human flesh. But we are limited by our own ability to understand, by our time-bound contingent nature. We cannot fully comprehend the Divine: if we could, He would hardly be divine!

And one of the things we must not forget, is that God is not an irascible being in need of being placated by us. The gap between God and the gods, is far far greater than the similarity of the words implies. That capital G stands for a huge amount (which is why it is sometimes written G*d, to underline the difference). It is the difference between alien beings we can nonetheless comprehend – creatures with wants and needs and moods like ours – and a Creator who is hardly even a being as we understand the word, because God has no form, no constraint by time or the laws of physics. He transcends our universe and our conceptions. He doesn't need our stuff.

So, in that sense, the people and priests in the Book of Joel are misunderstanding their God. He does not need to be persuaded to save them. He already loves them more than they know or deserve. A swarm of locusts has a natural origin in the material world, and may not be a sign of particular divine disfavour. (Though it still makes sense to ask for a meaning in events: because turning random events into meaningful acts is a basic human action, and a way in which grace is discerned, and a way in which we can see God at work).

But – and this is something I did not say or realise fully at the time – none of that means that the Israelites were wasting their time, or doing something unnecessary. They were lamenting – they were complaining, protesting, and asking for help – and those are not merely necessary, but also productive and helpful things to do. They were acknowledging a relation between the material and the spiritual that I have struggled to articulate, but that is necessary and important. And I understand that now more than I did forty days ago!

In the first place, to lament is to recognise that things are not right. That is a really important role of religion, as I wrote or said yesterday. The ways things *are*, is not how they were *meant to be*, no matter how firmly fixed things seem. So it is proper to complain to God, the creator and author of everything, Who has ultimate responsibility for everything that happens, good and bad: it is right and just to complain to Him about the things that are not right. Not because He has overlooked or forgotten them, but as a sign to ourselves that we recognise

this wrongness, and a sign to Him as well, that we understand the difference between right and wrong, and between His ultimate plan and goal for us and creation, and the contingent, partial mess that we see around us.

Lament is firstly, then, a sign that we understand that things as they are, are not how they should be. And we lament precisely because we trust that God desires our good, and will want to put these things right. After all, if God were really arbitrary and unpleasant, there would be no point in lamenting to Him.

And that word 'trust' is really important here. I think that often, we are simply far too polite to God. We think that we are, or want to be (and want to *be seen* to be) good and nice and kind people. We talk to God exactly as we do when someone asks us how we are, and we invariably say, "Oh, not bad, doing OK, you know, mustn't grumble", even if what we want to say, is to scream in rage or anguish, "It's awful; I hate my life; I hate my job; my knees are killing me, and I'm in constant pain", or whatever the dark and horrid truth really is!

Of course, in fact we recognise that normally, when someone says, "How are you?", they don't really want to know – it's just a polite way of saying, "Hello"! And we treat God in the same way. "Hello Father", we say, "We thank you for creating us and for the world, and for sending Jesus, and we want to ask you to heal Auntie Mary, and pray for the people in the Yemen, etcetera", when actually, if we were being honest, what we really want to say, would be something more like, "Hey, You, You wretched Almighty Being. What's the game, hey? Do You not see that we are suffering, here? Do You not see that we are miserable and frightened and alone and afraid and in pain? What the hell do You think you're playing at? Do You call this a well-made world? Well, do You?"

Now *that* is a cry of lament. And in case you think that's completely and utterly improper and irreligious, let me remind you of a couple of things. Firstly, that it is very much the way God is often prayed to in the Old Testament. The Book of Psalms, the Church's first hymn book, and before that the hymn book of the Jews, contains a great number of psalms of praise, but also a great number of psalms of lament. And those lamenting psalms which usually end in praise, often take precisely that kind of tone with God at the start. He is compared with a drunken warrior who's had a heavy night and fallen asleep on the job. The psalms are often very direct and not particularly polite, not at all.

And the second thing is to remind you that no matter what we think, it is in any case absolutely no use pretending. We can grit our teeth and pray politely all we want, but if we are secretly inwardly seething, God is going to know that perfectly well. We can't hide what we think or feel from Him, even if we can hide it from ourselves. So we might as well be honest, with Him and with ourselves. It will be better for us in the long run if we are, and it will all come out eventually anyway. It's not as though God can't take it, or as though His sensitive ears are going to be offended. God has been sworn at for thousands, possibly even millions, of years. Who knows what the angels have called Him, or aliens in ancient worlds! God is not going to be shocked by our vocabulary: He is not a maiden aunt!! (And in my experience of them, they were pretty hard to shock as well, even if they sometimes liked to pretend otherwise).

So, at a time like this, I think lament is a sign of honest faith. I think that God expects us to be honest with Him – He expects us to raise our fists, and cry aloud, and say, “What’s going on? This is unfair”. We recognise injustice: that the world as it is, is not the world as it should be. And we are honest before God about our pain and confusion and need.

And there is of course more to say than this. Because God not only wants us to lament to Him, He wants us to do more, much more.

Here, on Good Friday, we gaze at the Cross. And like the good pious people that we are, its cruelty revolts us and saddens us. We weep with the Marys, we stand with the women in sorrow and grief or, perhaps, we huddle with the disciples, ashamed and afraid. We rejoice, with holy hindsight, at this sacrifice that saves. We mourn that it was necessary, and rejoice that it occurred.

And all of that is right and proper.

But what we *do not* do, in my general experience, and we should: and indeed the liturgy demands that we should – what we do not ever do, is throw stones. We do not imagine or feel ourselves standing and jeering, and demanding His blood, even though we have just done precisely that in our Liturgy, in the reading of the Passion Gospel. “Crucify! Crucify!”, we shouted! But we didn’t mean it! We were only playing a part: one that we do not want to play: we do not want to be the baying crowd: we’d rather be the women or even the disciples. We only shouted because the Vicar told us to!

Well, yes, I did. And why *is* that part of the Liturgy today, and on Palm Sunday too? Why *do* we cry for blood?

Because we are *meant* to: that’s why. This is entirely the point. Why is God hanging there, defenceless, naked, bleeding and alone? Even if it was essential, for some odd and complicated reason, that He had to die, surely He didn’t have to die in exactly this way, in this worst of all ways, deliberately humiliating and ghastly?

But see; He thinks that He did! He thinks that He did have to offer Himself as a victim like this, exposed and vulnerable in exactly this way, precisely so that we can bang in a few nails of our own. We are called to lament, *and* we are called to apportion blame, with vicious violence. We are called to lament for the grief and pain we know, the grief and pain we see, the people dying today, of virus; but also those forgotten deaths, in hospitals and in gutters in this country; and in the Yemen; and in Ukraine; and in North Korean death camps; and Chinese concentration camps and everywhere else like them. We are called to lament for them, *and* we are called to pin the blame where it is due: Him. That is why He is hanging there. Because it is His fault.

He made this world. He holds this world in being. All things come from Him and return to Him, and only exist by and through Him, every moment of every day. We cannot blame evil – it exists, for sure, but He permitted it, allowed it. And maybe it makes things worse and does bad things, but still, evil is a work of His creatures – of us, maybe of forces infinitely more powerful than us – angels and spirits consumed by greed and hatred. But no matter

how powerful any such forces might be, if they exist; they are as nothing compared to Him. As nothing. Like fleas on an elephant. No angel, no spirit or alien or anything else in all creation, is comparable in any way at all to Him, the creator, the sustainer, the Monarch of all.

So it *is* His fault.

And the reason He hangs there, like that, for us, is so that we can blame Him, and rage and jeer and spit at Him ourselves.

We don't, of course, for all sorts of reasons. For one thing, it seems too raw. And impolite. Actually, perhaps it's too honest, and too dangerous, too exposing of our own needs, and angers, and vulnerabilities, and shames. It is safer, and more comfortable, to hide our heads away, and ignore all the suffering and pain around us and inside us. These days we won't even lament honestly, let alone take this further step into unrighteous desperate anger. We pretend that Christianity is some kind of Panglossian optimistic plaster: a kind of spiritual panacea, just there to make us feel better, like cough syrup. Swallow it and you'll feel happy in an instant.

But Christianity is a far more bitter medicine than that! It doesn't ever promise to make us happy: not the Christianity of the martyrs and the underdogs and those who lament and pray because there is nothing else they can do. Christianity is about truth and justice: and they don't guarantee happiness! In the end, our Christian faith demands that we look honestly, at ourselves and the world around us. We *have* to be honest. We cannot turn our faces away for ever: one day, in life or death or as we lie dying, we will have to face this Cross, to really listen to it, take on board the challenges it poses.

There He hangs, bleeding and dying. Soon He will be dead, properly actually decayingly dead. His mother will grieve over His cold congealing Body, wracked and inconsolable. And He will be buried.

And this pain is real and raw. And He was – as it happens – guilty of the crime of which He was accused: according to St John He did say, “Destroy this temple, and I will build it in three days”¹. He is guilty as charged, even if that (or perhaps any) offence is not something that ought to be punished by death.

Of course, He was right in what He said: He told the truth. His Body was the Temple: God's seat on earth. And He *did* restore it in three days. But the fact that the saying was true, and therefore not blasphemous, could only be demonstrated once He was found guilty, and in any case was really neither here nor there, since His trial and sentencing were only an excuse to get rid of an irritant and a threat, in which the truth of the matter was largely irrelevant.

¹ John 2:19; compare Matthew 27:40, and 26:61-64, where Jesus does not deny having said this; see also Mark 14:58-61, and 15:29 for his version of the same events.

But He is guilty, by our human law. Guilty, by that Law that of all laws has come closest to God; that Law that He Himself gave to His people. By that Law, the giver of that Law Himself is deservedly guilty: and this is not some sort of tragic accident of fate or irony: He intends this. (And what does it tell us about our laws, even the best of them – what does it tell us about our Justice systems, that He is guilty by the Law, of a truth we refuse to hear?) He hangs there, dying, and He says, “Blame Me: that's the point!”

This is why He's hanging there. We are full of grief and rage and frustration. Especially this year, in this time of death and loss and virus, but actually, every year; every year that there's been a human race that needed saving from itself, and from evil and sin. If we pretend to ourselves that we aren't – that we don't need saving – then we are lying, to Him and to ourselves, pointlessly. Or we identify ourselves as so unutterably, unbelievably complacent that there's hardly any point to our being here at all – except to have that complacency buried under the weight of this man's world-bearing cross.

And if we want to know how God interacts with history. If we want to know what God is going to do about plagues of locusts or plagues of virus, or oppression or tyranny or cancer or anything else: this is our answer! *This* is what He's going to do! *This* is His answer to every pain and grief and lament that we will ever know or could ever make, any of us. He is going to hang there, and call us to lament.

He calls us to lament, and out of that lament, here, today, He calls us to spend our rage and grief on Him. Crosses will not be ceremonially kissed this year, for obvious reasons: but even if they could be, it would be more honest, more appropriate, if we spat upon them instead, and exhausted our rage on Him. We come to kiss the Cross in pious thanksgiving: it would be more in keeping with the day and with our times, if we simply came to drop a tear, or to spit. After all, that is why He is here. Why He is always, and will always be here. Every day is Good Friday: every day, He is on the Cross.

There is no darkness of ours He does not embrace. No pain of ours He does not know. No historical depth He has not enveloped. He takes our sins, if we give them to Him. Our darkness, our rage and frustration, our fear and anger. He takes all of that, willingly, eagerly, like a lover seizing their long-desired beloved, like a parent clasping a rescued child to themselves.

He is a warrior. That is why He came. This is His battle. This is how He fights, and the weapon He chooses: His only weapon, ever. In the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* Jesus strips for battle like a wrestler, embracing the Cross, and like Jacob wrestling at the ford of the Jabbok², He refuses to give in, refuses to surrender. Jacob escapes from his fight with a limp and a blessing as the sun rises: Jesus clings on even as the sun sets. He does not get to limp away; He dies, and receives not a blessing, but a curse. He is the one who blesses in return. The Angel of Death passes over the Israelites in Egypt when he see the blood on their doorposts: he does not pass over God Himself, bleeding on the Cross.

² In *Genesis*, of course – chapter 32 verses 22-32.

Jesus dies in all-encompassing darkness. There is no darkness, death and loss He does not bear. And no moment when He wavers: no moment when love dies, even if faith and hope do, even if the physical dies and rots and bleeds out. He takes all the last and final hopeless wriggles of mortality, all the meaninglessness of life lived under the shadow of loss and death. He takes it, and there is silence.

And I can't say: He transforms it. He does, yes. But that's too easy, today. Too quick.

Every Last Supper, every Communion, is a remembrance – a summoning-up – of *this* Day. The bread is milled and threshed and then broken: the grapes are crushed and squeezed and then shared out among the soldiers. Every burst of human anger, every sin, every act of selfishness or cruelty, hidden and disguised, is another nail into Him as He hangs there. He knows them all. There is nothing that will not come to light. Nowhere that will not be illuminated: and that is a threat, not a promise. The darkness you hide even from yourself is no darkness to Him. Even in the grave, He is there³.

See Him descend even into the darkest places of creation, into the darkest places of our hearts. If we will not throw that darkness at Him, if we will not scream and rage at Him, then He will descend in search of it: He will harrow even Hell, in search of the truth of us, the pain, the loss, the rage the grief and anger and fear that lie in the deepest parts of us and of our history: the outrages we have forgotten even to remember. As if hanging on the Cross were not enough; see, He descends into the earth, into the tomb, into silence and darkness and death in search of that truth we cannot uncover, those feelings, those thoughts that we cannot bring ourselves to own or speak or acknowledge. Our own sordid complicities and collaborations with evil; our wilful dishonesty; our institutionalised corruptions to which we have grown blind.

He is not here, today, for Himself. He is not here because God demands or needs this. God is unchanging: unchanging love and beauty, timeless truth and joy.

He is here because we need this. He is here for us. Here so that we can lament, and here so that lament can turn into anger, so that lament can lance those boils of festering pain and fear and unbelief we nurture because we will not bring them to the light. This is His answer: and we may not like it or understand it, but it is the only answer we're going to get.

We can exhaust ourselves against Him: He is going nowhere: He is already everywhere, and everywhere like this. So, spit all you want. In the privacy of your homes or heads. No-one will see you, today. Bring to this Cross the loved ones we have lost, the fear that stalks us, the grief and anger, the loss. The deaths, the injustice, the loss of hope. Throw it all on. And just keep chucking. Death and decay and rot itself. Throw them on. He is hanging there to take it all. And He will outlast our rage, our grief. He will outlast our lamenting, no matter how long it takes, and how often we come back to it. He is endless, and His hanging is endless. And the harrowing is endless. Over centuries, over millennia; however long it takes.

³ Psalm 139:8

This is why He is here. Not to pay some kind of price in some odd theological board-game. He is here for far darker, deeper reasons than that: He is here for blood and Passion. If this is a game, it's one of *Waiting*. One of persistent, abiding patience; the expression of a flaming Passion that ignites stars and galaxies, and *waits*. A Passion that outlasts our rage as a parent's love waits for a tantrum to burn out. A Passion whose grandeur and scale dwarfs our meagre petty little rages and hurts and pains and wailings, profound though they are for us. A Passion that deserves the name, and the capital P – one that is distinguished by its capital just as God is different to gods.

This is why it's The Passion: because it is the one defining exemplar; the example that transcends and transforms our understanding of the word. God is Passion, for us and all that He has made, and so great and sweeping is that Passion, so true and deep His love and justice, that nothing will shake Him from His dogged pursuit of us, and nothing will shake Him from the only path that defeats evil, the only path that negates evil, the only path that refuses to play evil's games of rage and power and corruption: the path of true and absolute love.

As St Julian of Norwich saw in her vision: God is willing to die as often as it takes. There is no end to His self-sacrifice: there is no end to His love: there is no point at which He will turn, and seize the weapons of evil; there is no point at which He will turn away from the endless, opening, opened-out, emptying Passion that drains an endless perpetual love to us, that offers Himself ceaselessly, moment after moment after moment. All the blood in the world will drain through Him, through His body hanging there, or sweating in the Garden.

He hangs there, waiting.

Waiting for us to turn. Waiting for us to put down our swords, to take off our blindfolds, to open our eyes and then open our hearts. Waiting for us to begin to learn to love; to let His Passion warm our hearts; to let His flame thaw the evil out of us.

There is no answer here; no doctrine that will explain all this. No reason I can point to that will let all this make sense. There is just Him. Just love. Just Passion, burning for eternity. Burning for you: absolutely and completely, for you, in all your glorious stubborn sinful uniqueness; for you and for every single other person reading this, or worshipping, or utterly oblivious to His very existence: burning for each and every one of us in our beautiful huddled safe little seed cases of sublime potential.

There is no Doctrine of Atonement that will make all this make sense, because Passion doesn't make sense: that's the point. It is ridiculous, excessive, overwhelming, beyond all sense and reason. It is more than necessary, more than sensible, more than is required. It is not an answer: it is an embrace, an offer. He offers Himself: His arms, His blood: His life.

That is all. That's all this is, today. We come, we bring our pain and grief, our loss anger, our rage and evil, even that. We bring these gifts, like the wise men we are not, and in exchange we get a thing we cannot grasp or own or understand; a thing that flits beyond us like a will-o'-the-wisp; that will not let us rest. A thing born on a cross, and in bread and wine: we get love. Eternal. Absolute. Demanding. Self-forgetting.

*If there are no walls or fences
How can we be safe
Margins tame chaos
Into comprehension.*

*A cave explodes
Darkness and Fire
Burning borders
Wayleaves harrow under*

Standing at the Cross ways