

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 2 October 2016

[Lamentations 1: 1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1: 1-14; Luke 17: 1-10](#) from Vanderbilt

[Proper 22C / Ordinary 27C / Pentecost +20 Oct 2, 2016](#) from Textweek

Both the first reading and the Psalm are 'laments', expressions of grief; and looking at the first reading, the sadness and loss that is expressed is so evident it almost brings to life the writer. It can be quite helpful when reading the bible to get in touch with the writer, to seek, to feel and to understand the person and place that gives us some added context to the reading, and perhaps that is what also brings the reading to life.

And we can do this quite simply by imagining the writer; in the case of the first reading, how old do you picture the writer?

Probably he is someone in the autumn years of his life; for the older generations seem to lament more than the younger generations. They have lived more, seen more changes and they have lost more than the younger generations; and of course they have lost much of their youthful vitality.

The lament of the first reading is a looking back to a past which no longer is; looking back to a potential that now seems empty:

"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!"

It is a reading that must surely resonate at some point, and maybe at many points, with all of us that are into or over middle age. And so there we are; our very thoughts and feelings expressed poetically in the bible!

And the place of 'lamentation' is held within the 'Word of God'; and so in today's first reading we might just glimpse the purpose and process of our own lamentation.

The very first word of the reading, the "How" that begins the lament is both an exclamation and also serves as a question.

A questioning that hints at the value or purpose of engaging in the process of lamentation; a process of discovery and encounter; for here in our lament, we engage the griefs that we experience; and although grief always has an arrow to the past; the discovery of grief can bring wholeness and reality to the present.

The Psalm provides another lament and has a very different feel; initially it conjured up for me the image of a group of 'whinging poms'.

And that simple image is a helpful differentiation; for the poetic lament of the first reading is very much an inner lament, a loss of 'spirit' or loss of connection (faith); it serves as a poetic reflection of the loss of life's fullness and the loss of life's true calling.

However, the psalm is much more outward, it is a geographical lament and perhaps that is what evoked the image of 'whinging poms'; for this is a tribal lament echoed today by many immigrants who still have a part of themselves back in 'the old country'.

Once again, tribal laments also have a place and purpose for recognising what is lost and what we grieve when we move. When we leave home, or leave family, leave to emigrate or even change jobs; when we leave work, move house or move into a retirement village we change tribes and so echo the Psalm's lament and become aware of the demands that confront us in our 'new land'.

The next two readings have a very different orientation and the 2 Timothy reading provides us with a delightful bridge:

"4 Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy."

Paul's prayer for Timothy is no longer a lament and a longing for the past, rather, Paul points toward the future and the lament becomes a longing for fulfilment with joy.

When we discover the place of our lament, the grief of the past, and the loss we know within; there too we can seek and find our true future longing; or in the terms of Paul's prayer we can seek and find our wholeness and our purpose:

"the promise of life that is in Christ",

and the rekindling of

"the gift of God that is within you"; "a spirit of power and of love" and "a holy calling".

The final line of the reading encourages Timothy and so too encourages us to

"Guard the good treasure entrusted to you".

And perhaps that is what we might reflect on; asking ourselves exactly what is the 'good treasure' that we, each and all of us, have been entrusted with?

We can all so easily get stuck in the process of lamentation, endlessly looking backwards, aware of loss; and as the years pass the fire of potential becomes just a pile of ash with a few glowing embers.

We can all see around us glowing embers that we know will soon go out; and we can in all probability all see the same within us.

Today we are encouraged to have another look, to turn from lamentation and to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you”.

The gospel, cleverly chosen to compliment the other readings, offers us two valuable insights into the rekindling process.

In the first part of the gospel the value of ‘forgiveness’ is being underlined; a value that is further underlined when Jesus spoke of prayer; “forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us”

Perhaps forgiveness is the key that turns the arrow of lamentation into the rekindled longing for our fullest realisation.

And then the gospel goes on to reignite the promise and potential of faith: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

Most people will read with disbelief this statement or teaching of Jesus; most do not believe that they could ever say anything to a mulberry tree and have the tree obey them; and that is the whole point of what is being said; we have to go ‘beyond belief’.

When we look to what we believe the future holds, and again particularly for those of us in the older generation, we will find ourselves drawn back into the place of lamentation.

When we look with the potential of promise, a natural outlook for children, then we look to a future that is beyond belief, and that is the very treasure of our faith.

We are asked, in fact more than that we inherit the responsibility to

“Guard the good treasure entrusted to you”;

to create a future not of lamentation, but of promise, a future that makes manifest

“the gift of God that is within you”

Peter Humphris