

Lament and Assurance

Sermon for the Keble Mass at Newcastle Cathedral, 13 July 2017

Lamentations 3: 19-26; Psalm 31: 1-4, 7; Romans 10: 10-15; Matthew 5: 1-8

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+In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The thing that strikes me about tonight's readings is the way they combine lament and assurance—the way they honestly acknowledge the difficulty, the disappointment, the exposure that we can't avoid in ministry, while reminding us of how we face these challenges in faith.

The Book of Lamentations is all about defeat and exile for God's people, while tonight's passage brings the venting of personal grievances. Likewise, tonight's psalm is a *cri de coeur*—in a world that relies on scapegoating to discharge its violence, fully two thirds of the Psalms tell a different story: the scapegoat finds a voice, declaring “I'm innocent, I don't deserve it, this isn't fair, and I'm fed up.” Which of us in ministry, especially those of us who've given our whole adult lives to it, can't recall seasons like this, when lament bubbles over, even when no-one in the Church wants to hear it? As

Stanley Hauerwas once said, a Church that insists on always singing happy songs isn't being faithful to the Bible.

Yet this biblical licensing of lament isn't the whole story. Biblical lament typically comes in the context of assurance. We see this in tonight's Psalm portion, ending with "I will rejoice and be glad in your loving kindness: for you have looked on my distress and known me in adversity." Our Lamentations passage tonight is searingly honest about how bad things can be, yet it ends with assurance: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end."

So, brothers and sisters, we don't give up; despite everything we're reminded in word and sacrament that the always faithful God will be faithful again, even if for now the lament might threaten to drown out the assurance.

In the Catholic tradition of our Church, which was renewed and sharpened by John Keble and his generation, Anglicans recovered a trust in God's past faithfulness from the early Fathers, and the undivided Church of the first millennium. Beyond many divisions in the post-Reformation Church, and beyond many signs of decline and spiritual malaise in the Church of England, Anglo-Catholicism trusted the old story, it trusted the apostolic gospel, and so it set a renewing

course for the Church of England—transforming the theology, the worship, the prayer, the social witness and the parochial life of a nation. In Australia today, even though the census reveals what a dry season we're facing in terms of openness to faith—and even though our Church now has a shocking reputation in many places, to the great delight of our critics—nevertheless we're not giving up. Our inner compass is still pointing to true North, even if the familiar landmarks have been dug up or worn away.

And what about you and me? In our own lives and ministries, too, there's much scope for discouragement. Which of us, deacons, priests and bishops, have never experienced frustrations with colleagues, with institutional arrangements that inspire little confidence, with toxic parishioners, with clueless superiors, and with so much inertia and torpor to confront, not to mention frustration with our own stubborn failings in attitude, in prayerfulness, in motivation?

And so in light of all this I come to our New Testament readings for tonight. I initially wondered why our gospel cuts off at verse 8, leaving out all those proactive bits of Jesus' sermon on the mount: no peacemaking, no persecutions for righteousness' sake, no being reviled, no salt and light. Then it occurred to me that all these calls to action rely on what comes first, in these first 8 verses: about having

to work through our poverty of spirit, our depression, our lack of status and recognition, and in doing so to maintain our zeal for God's righteousness, which of course includes a zeal to be merciful, all of which is summed up in Jesus' call to holiness. These eight verses certainly don't gild the lily. They require hard spiritual work from us, facing difficult things in ourselves, rediscovering the good news about who we most truly are, and letting that good news have its way with us.

And finally, I come to our Romans passage tonight. The message is: out with the old and in with the new; out with a depleted religion of self-justifying insidership, and in with a new religion of radical inclusion, cutting across the key social status marker between Jew and Greek. Paul reminds us elsewhere about transgressing another of these anthropological hot zones, the one between male and female—and of course somewhere in the communion of saints I'm sure Paul is wishing that he'd mentioned gay and straight while he was at it.

Friends, St. Paul is the converted champion of a new life with God, beyond the sociological functions of religion. He commends something deeply interior, yet also world-transforming; something at once contemplative and active. And Paul's point of contact between this contemplative interiority of faith and the world's active

transformation, according to this Romans passage, is something we mightn't expect: it's Gospel preaching. Without Gospel preaching, Paul tells us tonight, the whole thing won't gel. Now, I know that some of us have encountered a bias against preaching in Anglo-Catholic circles—and living next door to Sydney diocese we might be tempted to react against any talking-down of the sacraments with our own neglect of preaching. But Paul knows no such distinction, nor did the Fathers, and nor did John Keble with that whole generation of Anglo-Catholic pioneers.

I love the slogan they use at the Episcopal Cathedral in Los Angeles: “Catholic worship, Gospel preaching and progressive social witness.” I believe that if we've got the nerve to match our Catholic love of the sacraments and our commitment to progressive causes with Gospel preaching, then we'll turbo-charge our ministries. Because gospel preaching heightens our expectation of the sacraments and makes us more radically progressive. And it lifts up people's hearts, contextualising and transforming the lament of churches and individual Christians. Gospel preaching helps us recover our nerve for ministry, too—and not just when we hear it, but also when we find our own hearts being lifted up as we sit at our desks preparing to preach, and as the joy of the Gospel gets us right up on our toes in the pulpit.

So, brothers and sisters, as we gather around the altar, as we renew our own belonging in the Catholic movement of Anglicanism, we needn't fear being honest about the challenges, and we needn't stifle lament, which is the Bible's authentic voice of faith. Instead, in faith we persevere in the face of these challenges. We do the hard spiritual work that alone yields the self-knowledge, mercy and holiness that effective ministry demands. And we remember the necessity of Gospel preaching, where contemplative and active meet, and where hearts are lifted up—including our own.

The Lord be with you ...