

Rediscovering Lament as a Practice of the Church – Especially on Deprived Housing Estates

Revd Ali Dorey

Mission Development Coordinator, North Sheffield Estates

and

Revd Dr Ian K Duffield

Acting Director Urban Theology Unit

Incumbent, St Leonard's, Norwood, Sheffield

and

Revd Julie Upton

Team Rector, Manor Estate, Sheffield

Abstract

This article explores the theology and practice of lament and argues for its rediscovery as a significant part of our Christian response to poverty. The authors examine theological and biblical material concerning lament, and outline a practical exercise enabling people to create their own laments. The article includes some examples of laments written by ministers and local people from housing estates in the North of England.

Key Words: lament, poverty, Psalms, Lamentations, oppression, solidarity, justice, music, prayer

Introduction

(Julie Upton, Ali Dorey)

This article was commissioned by an Estates Learning Network based in Sheffield. The Estates Learning Network was set up as a result of a visioning morning for staff and trustees of the Urban Theology Unit (UTU) based in Sheffield. One of the many discussions that took place at that morning was how UTU could be more of an effective resource for practitioners working on deprived housing estates and other urban areas.

The Network is an ecumenical group of lay and ordained ministers working on deprived housing estates in the Sheffield and Rotherham area. The aim of the Network is to develop shared learning about mission and ministry in this context and to support each other, as well as to perhaps become ambassadors for ministry in this context.

In our early meetings, we shared insights drawing upon our practical experiences of living and working on deprived estates, our various theological traditions and the Bible. We quickly identified a common motivation, driven by our contextual experience, to explore the theological understanding and practice of lament. Revd Ian Duffield and Revd Ali Dorey agreed to prepare a session for the group reflecting upon the place of lament within our ministry.

The Estates Learning Network found our session on lament very helpful and commissioned us to write this article, summarising the contents of the session. The article follows the structure of the session: Part One provides some biblical and theological background to the practice of lament. Part Two looks more specifically at how the structure of psalms of lament in the Bible can be used as a model for writing psalms of lament in a contemporary context. It describes the practical process we engaged with in our session in order to create our own psalms of lament. Part Three provides some examples of laments from our estate contexts created by the group as a result of engaging with this process.

We hope that others living and working in similar contexts might find our theoretical and practical exploration of lament a helpful model for their own reflections and practice.

Part One

Rediscovering Lament: Biblical and Theological Roots

(Ian K. Duffield)

1. The Lack of Lament

Lament, as an expression of pain, is neglected in the church today, even though people experience pain and the church uses the psalms where the individual lament is the most common form of psalm.

Why have we in the churches abandoned the lament? Is it because we have become too comfortable? Is it because we are not sensitive enough to communal pain and social injustice? Is it because our churches do not allow the voice of suffering and protest to surface in our prayers and liturgies? If the lament is, characteristically, the voice of the oppressed, then perhaps this means we have ceased to be a church of, for, and alongside the oppressed and disadvantaged. Although these questions indicate possible reasons why lament is neglected in the Church, I want to ask a more practical question: Can we rediscover the lament? I also want to address the biblical and theological roots, or under-girding, of such a rediscovery of the practice of lament.

2. The Voice of the Oppressed in the Psalms

There are two key biblical avenues into laments and lamenting. The first is the psalms, those conversations between the people and their God – the God who

creates, redeems, and is on the side of the oppressed. So the people, in the midst of injustice and hardship and oppression, can call upon this God.

On the whole the language of the psalms is very human, speaking about the way life really is;¹ and in the lament it involves 'describing the agony of present suffering'.² True laments are evocative of 'every human crisis and need';³ with the characteristic 'recurring questions' of the psalms of lament: 'why?' and 'how long?'⁴

Laments, dealing with limit situations, record the pain and sense of injustice, sometimes in general terms that others in similar situations can use. Laments often acknowledge two hard realities: (1) that their God has not spared them this injustice or hardship; and (2) that they themselves have contributed in some measure to this situation. Yet, the lament calls out to the only One to whom they can call, asking those profound and troubling questions: 'Why, O God, have you let this happen?', and 'How long do we have to wait, O God, before wrong is righted and oppression overcome?' Both questions focus on God. This takes us away from the immediacy of the suffering and places the difficulties before the only One who can handle them.

Often these questions turn into accusations against God. With great honesty, the feelings of the people are expressed, without the courtesies of liturgical speech and niceties of ordinary conversation, in the rough and ready tones of South Yorkshire bluntness and confrontation. But this blunt honesty is expressed directly to God: continuing 'to seek God (even while accusing), at a time when everything seems to speak against God.'⁵ So it is that almost all of the psalms of lament end hopefully, even joyfully: 'biblical lament presses towards praise'⁶ as its ultimate end.

The lament to God about the oppression which humans experience testifies to the struggling faith that God can liberate, that nothing is outside the concern and the justice of God. There is no concern, no feeling, no political situation, no economic condition, no social hardship that cannot be brought to the God of Exodus who rescued his people from slavery. After all it was God who created this earth, not mortal kings or fallible rulers. Laments often end, therefore, with 'a characteristic appeal to God to do something to remedy the situation.'⁷

3. The Ground of Hope in the Midst of Disaster: Lamentations

The second biblical avenue into laments and lamenting is the book that bears the name: Lamentations. Let's be honest: this Book of Laments is not commonly read or used by Christians, although it has a deep significance for Jews. Lamentations is a

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: St Mary's Press, 1st ed. 1993), 13.

² Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 156.

³ Norbert Lohfink, *In the Shadow of Your Wings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 125.

⁴ Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt*, 156.

⁵ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld & Erich Zenger, *The Psalms Vol. II (Hermeneia)* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 1.

⁶ Hossfeld & Zenger, *Psalms II*, 1.

⁷ Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt*, 156.

series of five poems of grief that lament a defining event for Israelite faith: the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and YHWH's Temple by the Babylonians in 586/7 BCE.⁸ This national disaster is still commemorated today by the Jewish people who use the poems of Lamentations in worship on their annual days of fasting and mourning, not least in relation to the subsequent destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

Although Israel was a chosen people, the central physical structures of their faith were not inviolable.⁹ So, how did this leave the promises of YHWH? Was their faith in jeopardy?¹⁰ These poems of crisis live in the tension between real faith and the reality of destruction. How can one make sense of such devastation for a chosen people? A similar crisis was experienced with the Holocaust. Given the total destruction and annihilation: What can people of faith say? What can they believe anymore? These laments express and voice the pain and questioning.

'Images of assault pervade the book'; the rhetoric dwells on this experience and the emotions associated with it: anger, sorrow, fear, revenge, disorientation, and so forth.¹¹ The survivors of the catastrophe are provided with strong, incisive words to express their horror and grief – these poems are tools of lament. There is no denial or suppression or repression. Readers and hearers are required to face the calamity head on with little to ameliorate its awfulness. Their own complicity cannot be avoided. The lack of intervention by YHWH cannot be hidden. The horror of the disaster cannot be glossed over with pious platitudes or cheap religious slogans.

However, there remains more to be said: 'The darkness of disaster, though ... deserved, cannot be God's final word to the community. They remain his servants, his people, who may confidently expect to experience in the future, as they have done in the past, his steadfast-love and his dependability.'¹² Despite the grief they experience, God's compassion never fails: it is new every morning.¹³ This is the ground of hope in the midst of darkness and despair.

4. *Lamenting as an Act of Truthfulness*

Lamenting is more than a cathartic exercise or a shedding of tears. Lamenting is serious business for it is not about minor and trivial needs and wants.¹⁴ Lamenting, at its deepest, is a profound expression of a people for justice and right, an appeal to

⁸ While this is debated, it is the most likely scenario for these laments.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 334.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 335.

¹¹ Deryn Guest, 'Lamentations', in Deryn Guest, R.E. Goss, Mona West and T. Bohache (ed.), *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 397.

¹² Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt*, 159.

¹³ Words from Lam. 3.22f; cf vv. 31-33.

¹⁴ Cf. the catastrophic events of 587 BCE.

their God to come and bring liberation. At the most important level lamenting is an act of truthfulness.¹⁵

Laments also express a desire for justice:

laments announce aloud and publicly what is wrong right now.
Laments create room within the individual and the community not only for grief and loss but also for seeing and naming injustice.
Laments name the warping and fracturing of relationships – personal, political, domestic, ecclesial, national, and global. The point of lamenting is ... to name injustice, hurt, and anger.¹⁶

Lament then is an act of truthfulness in various ways: a naming of destructive events; an expression of pain and anger and grief; an articulation of tension and confusion; a language for tears and inexplicable emotions; a naming of errors, failures, and injustice; a personal and political resistance to the way things are; a challenge to God; a desperate cry of hope in the midst of tragedy and loss, as we dare to keep faith with God.

5. Key Elements in the Practice of Lamenting

This biblical entrée into laments through the Psalms and Lamentations suggests a number of points that need to be kept in mind in the practice of lament in our own day:

1. Laments are characteristically expressed in poetic form (or song).
2. Laments are addressed to God – God provides the framework or field within which the lament is made.
3. Laments are serious business. They are not an excuse for tears or emotions, but deal with serious matters that are a source of struggle needing articulation.
4. Laments are questioning and interrogating kinds of discourse: asking the troubling and difficult questions posed by life, existence, and experience – both personal and corporate.
5. Laments are real – informed by the real experiences of real people.
6. Laments are acts of truth-telling – naming hurt, anger, confusion, despair, injustice, exclusion, hardship, and oppression.

¹⁵ See the key writings of Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), and 'Lamentations', in L.E. Keck *et al* (eds.) *The New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. VI (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 1011-72. 'An Act of Truthfulness' is Brueggemann's articulation, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 337.

¹⁶ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 128.

Part Two

A Practical Process to Enable the Rediscovery of Lament

(Ali Dorey)

1. *Psalms of Lament: A Model*

Walter Brueggemann provides a helpful description of the 'classic model' of biblical psalms of lament in his foreword to *Psalms of Lament* by Ann Weems.¹⁷ In his model, there are six commonly found ingredients in biblical psalms of lament, which often appear in a similar order. I have paraphrased the six stages of Brueggemann's model below:

1. **Naming God** in an intimate way (for example, 'My God' or 'God of my fathers')
2. **Complaint** – telling God 'how troubled life is and exactly what the trouble is' (often exaggerated like children exaggerate their complaints to make sure they get the attention of their parents)
3. **Petition** – demanding that God pay attention (for example, 'Turn, Heed, Save'). There is no doubt that God has the power to save, but he seems to not to be paying attention.
4. **Giving God some reasons for acting** – appealing to God's virtue, to repentance, to a time when God saved in the past, even appeals to God's vanity. '[These appeals] voice a dimension of faith that is not very respectable. But hurting people may on occasion risk the unrespectable, even the unorthodox.'
5. **Asking for vengeance** against the enemy who has caused this pain. ('The pain...daringly brings to speak what is darkest, and what is most unacceptable, in conventional theology and conventional social relations.')
6. **Rejoicing and praise of God** – a total change of mood. Anger and pain are spent, the speaker is confident of being heard, so praises God.

2. *Creating Modern Psalms of Lament for Urban Estates*

The structure above can be used as a model for creating new psalms of lament out of modern contexts. At the Estates Learning Network, we heard some examples of laments from housing estates written using this model.

I then introduced a piece of music called *Fratres* by the Estonian Eastern Orthodox composer Arvo Pärt.¹⁸ The title of this music may refer to the 'Orate fratres' – the

¹⁷ Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), x-xi.

Brueggemann enumerates the six stages I have paraphrased here in greater detail as part of his foreword to Weems' book.

¹⁸ Arvo Pärt, *Fratres* (1977) Pärt originally wrote this piece of music in 1977 for string quintet and wind quintet, but went on to arrange it for various combinations of instruments. Although the piece begins very quietly, it gradually builds to a very powerful, loud climax before dying away again. There are many recordings of the various versions of the piece. The recording I used in this workshop was from

part of the mass where the priest invites the congregation to pray that both his sacrifice and theirs may be acceptable to God. It is a key moment in terms of the involvement of ordinary people with the priest in the mass. Notes paired together in harmonically 'perfect' intervals move in tandem throughout the music, like brothers and sisters walking in solidarity with one another. The music invokes a melancholic and prayerful atmosphere, lasting for about twelve minutes. We listened to the music prayerfully and allowed it to help us to begin to reflect and to write our own psalms of lament, using Brueggemann's model, from our experiences of life on the estates where we live and work.

Part Three

Examples of Lamenting from Housing Estate Ministers

(edited by Julie Upton)

On Ash Wednesday 2012, our Estates Learning Network met at St Swithun's Church on the Manor Estate to engage with 'lament'. Parts One and Two above were offered to the group of ministers (lay and clergy) who gathered. In response to the process described in Part Two, participants wrote their own laments as they listened to the music and reflected on their experience of ministering on housing estates. Folk were then given the opportunity to share their lament with the group.

Some of these laments are recorded below as an offering to the wider church and as an invitation for others to engage with lament, both individually and communally, on housing estates and elsewhere.

The laments were written in different 'voices': the voice of a priest, the corporate voice of a church congregation and the voice of a person from the wider community.

Lament of a Priest

My God, the One whose face I seek every morning,
Why do you allow all this pain to cycle round for people?
I see a lot, but you must see it all;
The low self esteem, bad decisions about relationships, bad decisions about
 money,
About everything.
How are people supposed to make good decisions
With all the odds stacked against them?
Turn! Pay attention to the people of this estate.
Hear their cries of despair and pain.
These people were made in your image,
You say you love them, know every hair on their heads.
You said you knew them before they were born!

Arvo Pärt: A Portrait Tamas Benedek (Conductor), Antal Eisrich, Miklos Kovacs (percussion),
Hungarian State Opera Orchestra Strings, Naxos Rights International Ltd, 2005.

How will they know your love unless you hear their cries?
Destroy the Evil One who tempts people with rubbish they can't afford
And into relationships with violent people.
Make the plans of violent and selfish people turn to dust.
God, you are our God.
People of God, know his power to hear, to save, to rescue us from despair and
death.

Lament of a Priest

God of the moment
I made a visit, a visit to a family; a crying baby in a stinking room.
The walls brown and dirty.
The stench of cigarette smoke.
A floor with no carpet cold and bare.
The dogs scrabbling on the door.
The mess, the decay.
God you cannot desire this.
Look again kindly on this family
Why are they downtrodden, despairing?
No work, no hope?
Sent for their baby with as yet no name
God of hope, give a future to this family, this child.
Scorned brothers, misunderstood by others.
Who gave them this lot to bear?
It seems so unfair.
Turn their hearts, turn your heart, O God
Praise be your love O God

Lament of a Church

Our God, we praise you
You have been our light, our guide, our strength for ages past.
But what are we to do now?
The room echoes,
The pews are half empty,
Some people have drifted away,
Others have gone to be with you
And no one comes to fill the gaps they've left.
We are exhausted with serving, keeping things going
And still people don't come.
Have you changed?
Why do you hide your face from us?
We are tired. We can't keep doing all this.

Oh God, turn your face to us again.
Act as you've acted in the past.
For the sake of your glory, build up your church again
So the world will know that you have not abandoned your people.
Oh God, we trust in you.
You are our refuge and our strength from age to age.

Lament of the People

God? Are you there? Or am I talking to the wall?
I think you're there somewhere but I don't know.
Why is all this stuff happening to us?
One thing after another, all the time
All the time I'm ill, I never seem to get better
My children come to me for money
My granddaughter's in trouble - again
And now x has got cancer too. Where will it all end?
Will it?
Sometimes I get this weight - darkness, black anxiety over me
I can't breathe, I can't escape
Why does all the bad stuff keep happening to us?
If you're there, prove it!
Do something!
Bring us some good news for once.
Can I curse someone? I just want x out of our lives completely.
Take them away with their poison.
God? Are you there?

Lament of the People

God or force or whoever you are help us.
Day by day ignored, day by day abused.
Day by day spat on.
When will it end? Where can I go?
Where can I go for help?
It's all too much. What's the point?
But people do love me and I love my kids.
Do something God! Help us out of this hell.
Get rid of the sharks.
Take us to a peaceful shore.

Conclusion

(Julie Upton)

Our hope is that others may be stimulated by these efforts at lamenting to experiment with writing or speaking out their own laments. The process described here was simple and effective; and we commend it to others. Some of the examples of lament recorded in Part Three could be read out as part of the process described in Part Two, as a way of illustrating and stimulating others to write laments. The examples make it clear that ordinary experience is paramount and that the questions that we often ask ourselves internally can find a way of external expression towards God.

When folk have written laments, it is important to have the opportunity to share them. Of course, some people may not wish to divulge what they have written. But we discovered that there was something very powerful about the utterance of a lament – for it to be said and heard out loud – both for the person who had written it and for those who listened. Laments are for speaking, and for people to hear them and to enter into them.

Although our primary focus was council housing estates, and all the participants were either from the Anglican or Methodist traditions, we suspect that others in vastly different contexts and from different church traditions may find the approach we used helpful.

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The participants in this attempt at the rediscovery of lament were: Ian Cloke, Revd James Croft, Revd Ali Dorey, Revd Dr Ian K. Duffield, Revd Judith Jessop, Revd Steve Millwood, Revd Julie Upton, Revd Liz Wills.

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