REVD STEPHEN D. T. FROGGATT B.Sc., P.G.C.E., B.A.

SABBATICAL STUDY

DISSERTATION PAPER

Reclaiming the Psalms of Lament

Psalms help us to ensure that our acts of worship express joyful praise, deep longings, even painful sorrows. They help congregations to 'rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep' (Romans 12.15)[1]

ABSTRACT

This essay makes the case for a greater inclusion of biblical psalms, specifically those of lament, in contemporary Christian worship.

Revd Stephen D. T. Froggatt

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[1] (Harrison, 2009)

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INTRODUCTION

Why blame the dark for being dark? It is far more helpful to ask why the light isn't as bright as it could be.[2]

In the early stages of planning this essay, I shared with some congregations the theme of the study. Almost invariably the response was "Lament? Why would anyone want to lament?"

Then along came COVID-19 early in 2020. Churches found themselves facing completely unprecedented situations with buildings closed everywhere, bans on singing and gathering in person, enforced mask wearing, hand sanitising and social distancing - all because of this invisible yet life-threatening enemy.

Suddenly people found themselves needing to shout out "Why, God, why?" But the language of lament was not a familiar one, and few people had the words to pray. Our comfortable world had been wrenched apart. Our easy orientation had become bewildering disorientation.

And the people in these churches did not know what to do.

Elsewhere around the world, this was "just" another crisis. Congregations were used to calling out to God and expressing their angers, fears and discomforts, just as they had always done when life's challenges hit them hard. Their pandemic was the same as ours, but their response was completely different. They knew how to sing their lament psalms.

[2] (Bell, 2012)

What Is Worship?

Worship is foremost about what we bring to God. As some have said, Worship is about us bringing God's "worth-ship". In times of worship, then, we bring our full selves, warts and all, in a vulnerable and sacrificial gesture that may be costly to us but is appropriate in our own sense of offering what we believe God to be worthy of receiving.

Let us not fall into the trap of seeking what worship 'does for us'. Let us not enter worship with an expectation of how it makes us feel, or how our mood may be changed. Certainly, these can, and typically are, the results of sincere worship, but they are not the purpose of worship, and so worship should never be assessed on how it makes us feel. To say "I didn't get much out of worship today" is tellingly more about us and our priorities than about what we are willing to bring to God.

Of course, it may be that we come with a heart of praise. That's great, and that's what we bring. It may be that we come wanting to make our confession in our worship. Again, that's fine too. May be, however, we come not knowing how to worship, because we are in such a place where words seem inadequate. Maybe we simply want to "groan" wordlessly, even silently, as we acknowledge honestly before God who we are and how we are today.

In any congregation, there are as many back stories as there are people present. Each person comes with their own 'baggage' of stories, pains, hopes, fears, excitements, doubts, joys, sorrow and worry. To assume that everyone is at the same place spiritually is naive if not disingenuous. It is not enough for a worship leader to invite those present to leave all their baggage at the door in order that a sense of uniformity might be claimed - the baggage must be an essential part of what all are invited to offer in their worship. Worship is then more honest and sincere - for it is not for us to be anything but honest and sincere before God.

A Critique Of Contemporary Worship

What follows is a critique of a direction of travel of much contemporary Christian music today. While it is easy to be critical, and say about a church service "I wouldn't have done it like that", this section tries to be more specific about the worst excesses of the 'modern' Christian worship scene and where they seem to be going. Thankfully no single church in my own experience, whether visited in person, viewed online or even heard about anecdotally, is 'guilty' of all the following, but I have encountered examples of all these, and so I simply offer a word of warning.

One of the imbalances of much contemporary Christian worship is the unrelenting focus on the last three days of Jesus' life on earth - from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. In what is almost becoming a self-parody, a disproportionate amount of the sections called "a time of worship" tends to go on and on about "Jesus died for me" or "Jesus took my sins on the cross". Little, if any, reference is made to the years of Jesus' ministry and teaching about the Kingdom of God. Little, if any, reference is made to the many Gospel themes of addressing injustices to the poor and marginalised. Little, if any, reference is made to the love of enemies. Questionable lyrics about "love for Jesus" have long been caricatured in the "Jesus is my boyfriend" memes, but new songs seem to do little to redress this. Encouragements to address social injustices seem non-existent. One currently-popular worship song spends the greatest part of its lyrics repeating the idea about the name of Jesus being 'beautiful' (Chorus 1), 'wonderful' (Chorus 2) or 'powerful' (Chorus 3), suggesting that repeating the name "Jesus" over and over again in an ecstatic fashion is itself worship -

although this has more in common with Hare Krishna mantra chanting than the long traditions of Western Christianity.

Another imbalance in much of contemporary church services is the relentlessly upbeat nature of the music and teaching. Worship leaders seem obligated to whip up an emotional response through their seemingly pained expressions of ecstatic singing, the "Spirit-led" modulations into new keys which miraculously affect all the musicians at the same time, the 'spontaneous' prayer utterances spoken over carefully-rehearsed atonal chords on the keyboard, and the insistence from those who are next to take up the microphone that any such worship time was "precious", "special" or "powerful". EVERY. TIME. Talks seem to be less about biblical exegesis but more about psychological self-help, spotted with Bible proof texts that rarely give any consideration to their original context or meaning. Even testimonies are only welcomed if the one speaking can tell of a past involving alcohol, drugs, violence or gambling - ironically the worse the better - or even something as mundane as a period of unemployment, provided it has the obligatory 'happy ending'.

Worshippers are invited to "leave your problems at the foot of the cross" or even "leave all your worries outside the church" so that they too can join in with the relentless happiness of it all. There is no space for someone who hasn't got it all together. There is no acknowledgement of those who are struggling through a time of grieving, or who are unhappily single, or in a bad relationship, or whose income has stopped, or who has faced yet another disappointment at the fertility clinic. There is no acknowledgement of any problems at all - indeed those with problems are simply advised to have more faith, to pray harder, or to have others pray for them so that the problems go away. Any people who come with a problem are themselves seen as problematic because they are "not being a good witness for

Jesus". A too-literal interpretation of the injunction to "rejoice in the Lord always" has not helped things here.

A third imbalance is in the nature of church itself, whose behaviours seem to be more self-serving than anything else. The chief aim seems always to raise money in order to pay the church bills. The second aim, necessary to achieve the first, is the desire to increase members. A third aim is then to approach those members to undertake the various practical tasks necessary to run and maintain that church using the money raised. This circular referencing then determines whether or not the church is "successful" - i.e. whether the numbers are great enough to provide the income needed to pay its bills. If the members themselves are not providing the income, then the buildings are let out commercially to external organisations - a move which is laughably seen as "missional". For some churches, that is their entire existence - the people gather, they give money, the bills are paid, the people gather the following week and the cycle repeats. Such churches have become little more than social clubs which offer essentially just the opportunity for folk to meet up with their friends each week. "Mission", "Discipleship" and "Evangelism" are generally either passive activities (e.g. via posters on the wall) or activities ticked off via donations to other charities.

Healthier churches have prayer cells or house groups which meet in members' homes - although the principle of 'grow and split' (growing from 6 members to 12 then splitting in two) seems to have been lost, and many have slipped into a very comfortable sort of book-club-with-cake where the emphasis is on 'fellowship' rather than on biblical challenge or accountability.

The church model currently suffers from being spread too thin - too many churches in one area, of different denominations or even the same denomination - so that many members drive past one or more churches on the way to their preferred option. Fingers are often pointed in envy to churches who are numerically growing “because they teach the Bible” but which on closer inspection are simply peddling easy answers to life’s complex questions via a literal reading of Scripture - one which brings everything down to a guilt-driven system based on an ill-defined notion of ‘sin’. Teaching in such churches is typically clear-cut, offering black-and-white interpretations which leave no room for nuance; “The Bible clearly says” is a hallmark phrase. Consequently God is presented as being completely understood rather than mysterious, removing all opportunities for questions from those attending. When a member leaves because they find it lacking in depth, mysticism or authenticity, two more members come to take their place amongst the easy answers.

Occasionally the church’s happy social club gets thrown into complete disarray by a crisis such as the death of a young member. The congregation is perplexed because they prayed the person would get better. They can’t understand it because the person who died was a Christian and surely Christians are supernaturally protected. The congregation is confused because the much-quoted verses about “God’s plans to prosper you and not to harm you” or “God working for good in all things” really don’t seem to fit at all.

The problem is that the church has so forgotten what lament is all about that it cannot even remember to look it up again. There is no language, never mind liturgy. The church has been living on dry land for so long that when it falls into deep water it doesn’t even recognise the water, never mind recall how to swim. When the person in crisis needs the church the most, the church is impotent.

An Unbalanced Hymnody

Joshua Strickler[3] has done the analysis of ten years of the most widely-used contemporary Christian Worship songs as reported to CCLI. Even with a willingness to admit the vaguest link to a lament form, he was unable to find even a single contemporary Christian song that might be included as a song of lament.

The HymnQuest database currently features over 34,000 hymns and songs, from which a search for 'lament' produces just 52 results. Furthermore, since many of these do not fit the 'lament psalm' style, at most 34 of them could be considered as true lament songs - or 0.1% of the total.

To put this into context, when a typical hymnbook has no more than about 750 hymns and songs, or even 1000 in the big volumes, one could expect only about 1 song at most to be suitable for use as a lament, although this is reduced by the fact that many of the lament songs listed in HymnQuest are in personal compilations of poetry by the author rather than mainstream hymnbooks. The Methodist Church's latest hymn book, Singing the Faith, is perhaps at the leading edge in this regard when it offers a whol section of lament songs ("Conflict, Suffering and Doubt") of which particular relevant examples can be found at 630, 632, 640, 642, 643 and 644, with additional examples elsewhere in the book at 421, 433, 700 and 724).

In most Contemporary Christian Worship, when the songs are chosen from 'popular worship songs' rather than from a slightly more balanced hymnody in a published hymn book, the chance of picking a lament song would seem to be almost zero.

All this is to be considered against the range of themes represented in the first hymnal - the Psalter - in which the theme of Lament was the one with the *greatest* number of songs.

[3] (Strickler, 2015)

Psalms In Christian Worship

The Psalter is a Jewish song book, so why is it used in Christian worship at all?

For a start, Jesus was a Jew, and he knew the Psalter well, quoting it often. It is not difficult to find Psalm references scattered throughout the New Testament, and any good cross-reference Bible would give specifics. In our case, Jesus quoting the lament Psalm 22 while dying on the cross is sufficient for this paper. If Jesus was familiar with the Psalms, then, it follows that we as Christians should be familiar with them too, if only to understand the many references to them made by Jesus. Christians and Jews worship the same God after all.

The second reason is that we can approach the Psalms through the eyes of Christian faith. With the hindsight of the life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus we can see in the Psalms much that points to Jesus. Specifically, the allusions to the 'Messiah' or 'Anointed One', or even references to 'The King', all find new meaning when viewed forwards to the life of Jesus rather than backwards to the history of God's people.

The third reason is that the Psalms offer a truly balanced hymnody, addressing the gamut of human emotions and circumstances. The Psalms are "The language for all seasons of the soul"[4]. Just as the Complete Works of Shakespeare are celebrated for their complete understanding of the human condition, so too is the Bible, specifically the Psalms, which is why these two collections are still considered essential reading to accompany one's musical choices on Radio 4's "Desert Island Discs".

Finally, the Psalter is designed to be sung. Despite the fact that the original Hebrew is not used in Christian worship, the poetry is sufficiently strong to survive any number of

[4] (Schmutzer & Jr, 2013)

translations, from literal to poetic to metrical. The shape and content of the psalms still have rich value as source material to be sung as part of Christian worship.

In Christian history, the Psalms have always played a part. What evidence we have of the very earliest Christian worship, indicates that Christians gathered to sing “Psalms and sacred songs”. The Church Fathers used to read through the Psalms in their entirety every day; this is absolutely possible given that David Suchet’s recent recording of the Psalms from the NIV Bible takes 5 hours 34 minutes of unhurried speech, while St Paul’s Cathedral chanting their way through all 150 Psalms complete with Glorias takes just 12 hours 27 minutes. Benedict, who founded the monastic order now known as the Benedictines, instructed his fellow monks to read and pray through the Psalms once in every week. The Cathedral Psalter, following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer (1662), apportions the Psalms for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer according to a structure which completes all 150 Psalms in 30 days.

Currently one is likely to find the singing (chanting) of Psalms in the country’s Anglican Cathedrals during the daily singing of Morning and Evening Prayer, where the monthly singing of all 150 psalms still continues - some in the morning and some in the evening as mentioned above. Other ‘High’ Anglican churches also sing the psalms on occasion, although most likely not the full set every month as this would necessitate services twice a day every day not just once on Sunday. Theological Colleges are likely to gather each morning for morning prayer, and Psalms will be read aloud even if not sung. Recently the Catholic Churches have re-introduced the use of simple extracts from the psalms to be sung responsorially by the congregation during Mass.

The picture elsewhere is not as promising. There is no longer an expectation that a psalm will even be read, never mind sung, in worship, so the likelihood that a typical church service today will include a psalm of lament is vanishingly small.

Why Psalms Faded Out

We have seen that the early centuries of Christian worship placed a central focus on the use of the Psalms as the sung prayers of the church. We can follow such use of the Psalter on to the Middle Ages and as far as the Reformation. In the last 500 years or so, however, the Psalter has been losing that central spot, particularly the use of the Psalms of Lament.

Harper and Barker[5] tentatively offer some of the reasons why this might be so:

First of all the Renaissance (literally re-birth) saw a paradigmatic shift in worldview based on Knowledge. This was the era in the confidence of human ability and thinking that moved away from religious superstition towards humanism. It was the era of the rise of reason and intellectualism that sought to apply the best of knowledge in all its fields from around the world. Far from rejecting Christianity, however, the Renaissance movement devoted much of its greatest attention to religious subjects through its art and architecture. However, this was the early modern period and the more superstitious elements (such as 'appeasing the gods' or 'the gods sending disease') were demonstrably on the wane. Consequently, the sense of God's complete and overarching sovereignty was starting to be questioned and undermined. The Reformation brought Luther's 95 Theses of Reason to the fore, and the Protestant Church was born.

Close on the heels of the Renaissance came the Enlightenment ('waking up'). This saw the explosion of Philosophy, Economics, Science and Mathematics - a shift in epistemology that praised reason rather than religion as the way to know truth, and so trust in

[5] (Harper & Barker, 2017)

God's sovereignty and control of the world was being visibly eroded. Since the lament psalms take as their starting point the sovereignty of God, they were seen as increasingly irrelevant. On the positive side, religious tolerance was promoted, and the church and state became separated.

Stepping forwards a few centuries we come to Modernism, and in particular the beginnings of the study of Scripture from a textual analysis perspective rather than as the inerrant and unchallengeable 'Word of God'. Psalms started to be seen on their own individual merits rather than simply as part of a wider whole (see Gunkel's Form-Critical Analysis later), and with a sort of cherry-picking which survives to this day, the Psalter was broken up into individual psalms, with many Psalms of Lament ending up on the editing floor.

In response, the Fundamentalism movement sought to restore the sacred nature of Scripture in its own right, although not so much the lament psalms. The Scofield Reference Bible - one of the most popular resources for preachers in the 1950s and 60s - went as far as discouraging the use of lament psalms altogether as completely irrelevant for Christians. Around this same time, the western stiff-upper-lip mentality of suppressed emotion, particularly grief, and the general embarrassment about questions of suffering, coupled with the rise of the prosperity gospel movement, led to the erroneous belief that crying out to God in lament demonstrated a lack of faith.

What happened over time, then, was an increasing idea that the Psalms, in particular the Lament Psalms, were seen as both irrelevant and lacking in value. Where we find the Psalms still in regular use today we find links which can trace the practice back to the

Reformation Era (e.g. the Book of Common Prayer) or even pre-Reformation (within the Catholic Mass or via the Monastic traditions). Since the above section offers the briefest summary of 500 years of mainly Western civilisation, those cultures outside this history timeline (for example the timelines of the growth of Christianity in African and South Asian countries) find themselves today in a very different place, where the lament psalms haven't suffered the same fate.

The Penitential Psalms

As far as can reasonably be traced, Augustine (354-430) and Cassiodorus (c. 485-585) were the first commentators to set aside the seven 'Penitential Psalms' - psalms which were considered to be of particular usefulness in making one's confession to God. The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) and Alcuin (735-804) also adopted the categorisation.

The Penitential Psalms are as follows:

Psalm 6

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath.

Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Psalm 38

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath.

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;

Psalm 102

Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you.

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

Psalm 143

Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness;

Putting this in the context of early Christian history, it was the Desert Fathers (3rd Century) who promoted an ascetic spirituality from which came the Christian monasticism movement. Notable Desert Fathers include such well-known names as Anthony the Great, Athanasius of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. The later Rule of Benedict (6th Century) established the Benedictine Monastic Community which survives to this day. For all these communities, Psalms were a key part of the daily worship, and as we have seen, a required recitation of the entire Psalter each day was not unknown, and certainly the psalms were expected to be memorised.

It was the Desert Fathers who first identified what came to be known as the "Seven Cardinal Sins", or more popularly, the "Seven Deadly Sins". There was a little variation between early and later lists, but the seven known today (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth) were given their standardisation by Pope Gregory I in 590 AD. These

seven were considered failings of the respective seven “heavenly virtues” (humility, charity, kindness, patience, chastity, temperance and diligence), the practice of which was considered the best way to avoid those seven temptations.

Over time, the penitential psalms were seen as ‘steps to confession’ as if they formed a ladder of penitence. Furthermore, by the 14th Century, each Penitential psalm then became associated with one of the Seven Cardinal Sins as below:

Psalm 6 - Against ANGER

Psalm 32 - Against PRIDE

Psalm 38 - Against GLUTTONY

Psalm 51 - Against LUST

Psalm 102 - Against GREED

Psalm 130 - Against ENVY

Psalm 143 - Against SLOTH

In some cases, the pairing of the psalm with a cardinal sin was a rather tenuous link, but the whole gave a much needed structure to the emerging liturgy of confession. These seven psalms would have been recited each day as part of the confession for the past day’s sinful thoughts, words and deeds, and also as a prayer for protection against those same temptations for the day ahead.

Form-Critical Analysis

The heavy lifting in the modern categorisation of Psalm types (the so-called form-critical analysis) was done by German scholar Hermann Gunkel and his student Sigmund Mowinckel in the early decades of the 20th century. Goldingay[6] cites the original work of Gunkel and Mowinckel, particularly the way Gunkel classified the psalms into three important groups.

1) **Psalms of praise and worship** rejoice in who God is and what God has done to redeem.
2) **Psalms of lament and prayer** emerge from contexts when God does not seem to be acting in a redeeming way for individual or people.
3) **Psalms of thanksgiving or testimony** confess what God has done for individual or community in response to such prayer.

Gunkel also noted other less significant groups (such as 'Royal' psalms) but these are not considered here. Mowinckel added the insight that all the psalms were intended for public worship - i.e. as liturgical texts boiled down, edited and re-written over generations until arriving at their present form, rather than having been created ready-to-go by one individual on one occasion in response to one particular circumstance. Current scholarship dates the authorship of the psalms to only around 500 years at most before Jesus, and most probably written around the time of the Babylonian Exile, as God's people started to write down their stories of origin and journeying.

[6] (Goldingay, 1980)

To begin the breakdown of the Psalm Types here, we first note that the Psalter is actually *five* books, not one, each concluding with its own doxology. These five books are designed to echo the Five Books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Clearly it is not as simple as 30 Psalms in each, for the psalms are of different lengths and have their own themes. Furthermore, the numbering of the psalms we have today came much later than the ascription to the five books.

Book 1: Psalms 1 to 41 (41 psalms)

Book 2: Psalms 42 to 72 (31 psalms)

Book 3: Psalms 73 to 89 (17 psalms)

Book 4: Psalms 90 to 106 (17 psalms)

Book 5: Psalms 107 to 150 (44 psalms)

Book	**Praise & Worship**	**Lament & Prayer**	**Thanksgiving**	**Other**	**TOTAL**
Book 1	3	20	11	7	**41**
Book 2	3	19	4	5	**31**
Book 3	4	9	1	3	**17**
Book 4	11	2	2	2	**17**
Book 5	21	11	8	4	**44**
TOTAL	**42**	**61**	**26**	**21**	**150**

This summary then shows us two important details:

1) Lament/Prayer is the single most common psalm type in the Bible
2) The Lament psalms are concentrated more in Books 1 and 2 of the Psalter.

The Lament Psalms

We have already seen that Gunkel and Mowinckel are the two scholars who did the most for the form-critical analysis of the psalms. They continue to be quoted by Psalm scholars today.

Closing in on Lament psalms, the two names that most frequently arise in the literature are those of Walter Brueggemann[7] and Claus Westermann,[8] although Waltke[9] and Cohen,[10] and to a lesser extent Bent,[11] Bradbury,[12] Harrison,[13] Stocks[14] and Wellington,[15] are also promoting the reclaiming of the lament psalms in contemporary Christian worship.

Brueggemann, in particular, provides a framework for viewing the Psalter in three different *sitz im lieben* or 'life settings' of God's people: Orientation, Disorientation and New Orientation, so that the Lament Psalms correspond particularly to those states of 'Disorientation' - that this is not as it is supposed to be; that this is stressful; that this is hard to bear; that this is a time of anger, confusion and despair. Such a state begs of God to be taken to a New Orientation (which may possibly include Re-Orientation) and trusts God to end the time of Disorientation.

[7] (Brueggemann, 2002)
[8] (Westermann, 1981)
[9] (Waltke, Houston, & Moore, 2014)
[10] (Cohen, 2016)
[11] (Bent, 2018)
[12] (Bradbury, 2007)
[13] (Harrison, 2009)
[14] (Stocks, 2007)
[15] (Wellington, 2015)

The following Psalms have been categorised as Lament Psalms:

Book	Lament Psalms	Count
Book 1	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 41	20
Book 2	42, 43, 44, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71	19
Book 3	74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89	9
Book 4	90, 102	2
Book 5	108, 109, 120, 123, 130, 137, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144	11
	TOTAL	**61**

Any categorisation is of course subjective, but the above list represents neither a too strict nor a too generous inclusion of psalms within the genre. The categorisation above is taken from the work of Pemberton,[16] who summarises the work of previous annotators.

Westermann adds the insight that Lament Psalms are further subdivided into Individual Laments (e.g., 3; 22; 31; 39; 42; 57; 71; 88; 120; 142), and the much less common Communal Laments (e.g., 12; 44; 80; 137). These are being treated as one kind for the purposes of this short essay.

Why Did The Psalmists Lament?

Our modern understanding of the word ‘lament’, should we use it at all, is probably most associated with lamenting the death of a loved one. In fact, the lament of grief does not really feature in the Psalms, certainly not as a response to death. Death was such a normative

[16] (Pemberton, 2012)

part of life that it was not hidden away and viewed as calamitous; rather, death was marked with ritual and moving onwards, especially if the one who had died had previously made their farewell speech and bestowed their blessing on their family / followers (as we see performed by Jesus before his crucifixion).

Death is not, therefore, a major part of lament. It may be that the decline of our use of lament in Christian worship has as a contributing factor our modern awkwardness in the face of death, particularly our relative inability to cope with it compared with just 1 or 2 generations ago. Nevertheless, the 'cry of lament' in the Psalms is not primarily a cry of grief in the face of bereavement; rather it is a cry of desperation, of outrage, or of extreme stress.

There are three broad headings under which the theme of the psalmist's lament is being made - about "the Enemy", about Self, and about God. Pemberton[17] offers the following subdivisions:

ENEMY

- Attack
- Speech
- Wickedness
- The enemy is against God

SELF

- Sorrow or distress
- Physical pain or illness
- Sin
- Honour or shame

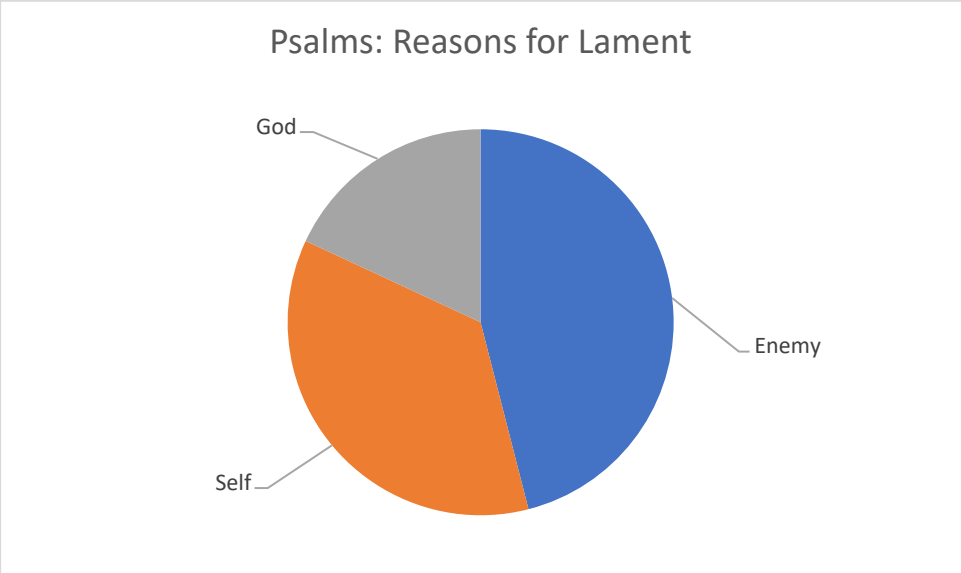
[17] (Pemberton, 2012)

- Protesting innocence
- Alone
- Undefined or other

GOD

- Absent or delayed
- God's anger
- Sense of separation
- Other

The theme of enemy attack or oppression is the dominant one amongst the lament psalms, as indicated by the breakdown below:



Note that many Psalms address multiple themes, so this is a simple quantitative analysis based on the mentions of the above categories, both implicit and explicit. A broad reading of the 61 Lament psalms would give a similar overall impression

What Is Lament?

"Lament is a genuine cry of faith, not faithlessness, for at its core is a recognition that one's own personal situation, or situation in society, is in the hands of a sovereign God; the person of faith brings their complaint to their sovereign Lord, instead of complaining to others about him."[18]

Lament is most certainly an act of faith. It is an expression of trust that not only does God care about us even when all we feel capable of doing is shouting at God, but also it is an expression of trust that somehow, God's ¨hesed" or "lovingkindness" will be revealed in due course.

Professor Walter Moberly of Durham University writes,

"*the predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith. . . . Moreover they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.*"[19]

In the lament, the one crying out to God is complaining that this situation is wrong. To use Brueggemann's words, this is a time of *dislocation* or *disorientation*. In the Christian West we have perhaps been living too long in a state of comfortable *orientation* to appreciate it for what it is. Something like the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre reminds us that there are still plenty of reasons to cry out "Why, God, Why?" Lament is the language of

[18] (Harper & Barker, 2017)
[19] (Waltke, Houston, & Moore, 2014)

complaint, of confusion, of longing, of grief, of anger - of all those emotions that pour in when the balance is upset. The Psalms of Lament give us poems written in just that language, so that we can sing songs of lament when we have no words of our own.

A Typical Lament Psalm

Gordon Fee[20] offers the following analysis of the 'typical' lament Psalm, based on the scholarship of other lament psalm analysts:

1. **Address**.

The psalmist identifies the one to whom the psalm is prayed. This is, of course, the Lord.

2. **Complaint**.

The psalmist pours out a complaint honestly and forcefully, identifying what the trouble is and why God's help is being sought.

3. **Trust**.

The psalmist immediately expresses trust in God, which serves as the presuppositional basis for his complaint. (Why pour out a complaint to God if you don't trust him?) Moreover, you must trust God to answer your complaint in keeping with the bigger picture, God's own greater purposes predicated on God's grace, not necessarily the answer that you yourself would come up with.

[20] (Fee & Stuart, 2003)

4. **Petition (Deliverance)**

The psalmist cries out to God for deliverance from the situation described in the complaint.

5. **Assurance**.

The psalmist expresses the assurance that God will deliver. This assurance is somewhat parallel to the expression of trust.

6. **Praise**.

The psalmist offers praise, thanking and honouring God for the blessings of the past, present, and/or future.

Using Fee's analysis, we can take two typical Lament Psalms and see how the various parts come together.

EXAMPLE 1 - Psalm 3

1 O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me;

Address & Complaint

2 Many are saying to me, "There is no help for you in God." Selah

Complaint

3 But you, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.

Trust

4 I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah

Trust

5 I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.

Trust

6 I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

Trust

7 Rise up, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God!

Petition

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.

Assurance

8 Deliverance belongs to the LORD; may your blessing be on your people! Selah

Praise

EXAMPLE 2 - Psalm 13

1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

Address

2 How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Complaint

3 Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
Petition

4 And my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
Petition

5 But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
Trust

6 I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.
Praise

Contemporary Lament

June Dickie[21] has been working with young adults in South Africa who have been “carrying heavy burdens” in some of the deepest psychological ways imaginable - “pain-bearers” from various sectors (refugees, AIDS-sufferers, and members of the LGBT community) - and together they participated in short workshops where they studied Psalms 3

[21] (Dickie, 2018)

and 13. They then composed their own laments using features of biblical lament: complaints, petitions, requests for justice, and an honest expression of their mood (positive and negative).

What began with a reading of the two psalms progressed to highlighting "whatever resonates with you" and a realisation that here was some language that was relevant to them. This was new language. It was helpful language. It was cathartic language.

From the workshop came several deeply moving laments written by the women, for example, this one from someone who was HIV+ following a sexual assault:

Why me?

What have I done to deserve this?

What have I done to be rejected by you, Lord?

Why have you turned your back on me?

Why let my enemies celebrate my fall?

Why can't you show them your power?

Lord Almighty, I know you're a living God.

You make things happen.

Prove it to them.

I will forever praise your name.

Here's another - a young Zulu woman with AIDS:

1. Lord, till when will I suffer?

Every time I try to put things together ...

For how long will people play me?[22]

[22] "Play me" = use me

They make me like a car that won't start, a useless one.

Till when? Life is not coming together.

And you are there, just looking.

Didn't they say that you listen when you are called?

But you are taking long to answer, But ... till when?

Till when, my Lord – me leaving my poverty?

Others do get help, but me – I'm not.

2. I know my Lord, I have to wait,

3. But it's hard.

4. I will stay in the hope, And you are my light.

This next lament was a communal lament from a group of LGBT women:

My God, listen to our prayer.

Don't hide when we need you. I'm confused and tired.

We only need you, Lord. My God listen to our prayer.

When bad people talk bad about us, they spit on our backs.

If we had wings, we would fly to a better place.

My God, listen to our prayer.

God, make them talk nonsense.

Make them go mad. Because they have done bad to our community.

God, listen to our prayer.

In other work,[23] the same author used Psalm 55 with a group from Capricorn, an impoverished township in Cape Town, suggesting to them that they might also write their own lament responses, but perhaps using the framework of the Lord's Prayer to do so. Here are some of their responses collected together into one lament:

Father in heaven,

You are my father because you made me.

Lord, I love you. And I'm glad that I can call you my father. You are the best father.

hallowed be your name.

We do not see your name being honoured in South Africa.

Lord, you are holy.

We do not see God's name being honoured in the church.

God is not being honoured by some of my friends.

We do not see your name being honoured in our schools.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Babies are thrown away like trash. Please help us!

People try to take blessing for themselves (greed).

There is too much violence. We ask you for protection.

Many don't fear God. They drink every week and live in sins.

God is not being served as king at my neighbour's house.

God is not being served as king in Parliament.

[23] (Dickie, 2019)

Give us each day our daily bread,

Please, Lord, look after my child well.

Yes, Lord, I do need your food.

Money for rent. Electricity.

Lord, we need love and understanding.

Lord, give us spiritual food in our land.

Please make our roads level (no potholes).

I ask, Lord, for the cleansing of our street.

and forgive us our sins,

I did a lot of things wrong. I know you can forgive me.

I did wrong to my sister many times, and I feel so sorry.

There are long-past sins that still trouble me.

I have failed you in my mind and thoughts.

Forgive my sins with my wife and children.

I am angry at my son-in-law.

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

I need to forgive people that hurt me although it is tough.

Lord, bring healing in our relationships.

I am angry about my daughter and husband.

People who are very close to me [have wronged me and I feel angry about them].

And lead us not into temptation.

Please help me to not watch too much TV.

I have troubles at home that are getting in the way of my relationship with you.

Help me to share food.

Keep me from having anger in my heart.

I am too much with wrong friends.

In these studies, the author details how helpful this process of reading and writing laments was for the (mainly) women in her groups. The process validated and gave space for their deep feelings, and offered permission to create prayers to God using raw, honest language not 'church' language that sought to paper over the cracks. The shared safe space was also instrumental in the healing process. These laments written by the women did not need to be taken into church later to be presented and prayed. This *was* church for them.

Lament and Social Action

There is nothing like the cry of a child shouting "It's not fair!" at the top of their voice. It expresses the power of anger felt at the injustices of the world. It's a cry of frustration, too, as the child feels that the balance of power is not in their favour and so they cannot do anything to redress the injustice. As the child gets older, this same sense of wanting justice may lead them into politics so that there is an opportunity to do something about it all.

The 'Jesus Manifesto' of Luke 4:18-19 insists that the Kingdom of God is about challenging injustices. If we are going to call ourselves a Christian Church, then we must surely be held to account on how we have confronted local, national and global injustices.

But first we must get angry. First we must see that "This is not the way things should be!" We must be able to find that inner child who screams "It's not fair!" and use the power

that we now have as adults, and particularly as a church organisation, to cry out about the social injustices around us - daring to open our eyes and to experience the pain of others. Being bothered enough to do something about it.

That is another purpose of lament - crying out to God that this is a messed up world, where some individuals struggle to get by on a dollar a day, while others spend $40 million on a yacht; in a world where 99% of the wealth is owned by 1% of its population; in a world where people die of hunger in one part of the city, and catering dustbins of surplus food are discarded in another; in a world where victims of war and persecution risk their lives to scramble into a boat seeking asylum, to be greeted by officious border guards demanding to see non-existent papers, or by ruthless people traffickers with an eye to the money they can make through the sex trade or modern slavery.

Where is the church lamenting these injustices? Wasn't Jesus always to be found with such as these, calling us to do the same? Who will lament the wrongs, crying out to God for things to be put right, and for us to be shown what part we can play in response to the silent prayers of the voiceless?

Liturgy

One urgent change I believe we should make immediately is the recognition and validation of the unspoken laments which members of our congregations bring with them when we gather. I believe it is unhelpful to adopt a "leave your problems at the door" approach. Instead, when we gather for worship, we should verbally include both those who are feeling fine and those who have barely managed to face the day. This means the avoidance of generalisations such as "We just wanna praise you today" and a recognition

instead that while all we bring is indeed our worship, for some of us it is most definitely a "widow's mite" that we offer because frankly we've nothing else to give.

Worship songs should include at least one song which is more subdued; one that might be followed by prayer for all those who can barely look up for fear of crying. Similarly, when we confess, we must remember that confession is primarily about being honest before God, and offering our vulnerabilities within that, including here all those whose lives are currently in a mess.

We recognise that some people may be grateful for another congregation member to pray with or for them, either in the service or at the end. However, for others this might be the very last thing they want, and so provision must be made for this too. It takes a very sensitive Greeter or Church Steward to read quickly whether a person coming into the church building is keen for a companion or more keen to be left well alone. Our mantra of "All are welcome" must definitely include an unconditional welcome of all those who are struggling without us feeling obliged to "fix" them.

Intercessions are another important part of the liturgy. Rather than a bland "We pray for those who are carrying heavy burdens", perhaps we might be bold to follow the lead of the Psalmists - "Lord, our burdens are too great and we cannot bear them! We are weak and in despair - how long must we wait for you?" Actual quotes from the Psalms can easily be used - either as they stand, or prefaced by "As the Psalmist said,…"

We must also be bringing to God in our intercessions the laments of all those who are too weak to pray, including those outside the church who are victims of oppression and social injustice.

All that being said, however, it is essential in a Christian act of worship to offer Christ's resurrection hope into the bleakest darkness. This does not mean assuring the congregation that a person with dementia might get better, however, or that a person dying of cancer will recover. It means reminding the congregation that even in the deepest darkness, the light of Christ still shines, and its light can never be overcome by the darkness. Even death itself has no ultimate power for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So it is that the final liturgical act, that of blessing and dismissal, must always include a reference to God's peace, and of sending everyone out by the grace of God to face another day.

Lament In The Liturgical Year

When we lose the shape of the liturgical year, we are in danger of losing the rhythm of our worship. Where no observation is made of the church seasons, we are left with the bland formulaic diet of worship during which any given Sunday looks much the same as any other.

The reasons for my preference for the use of the 3-year Lectionary (RCL) as adopted by the Methodist Church are twofold. Firstly, due attention is made to the feasts and festivals of the church's year through apposite readings from Scripture. Secondly, over a three year

period, a significant proportion of Scripture is read; admittedly it is not the whole Bible, but every single book is included, with multiple readings even from short books like Obadiah and 3 John. It seems odd to me that churches which claim to be “Bible based” actually base so little of their worship on working through the whole Bible over the course of several years.

We have already noted the use of the Psalms in a liturgically directed sequence throughout Christian Church history, but especially since the 1662 Book of Common Prayer which assigned a subset of the psalms to each morning and evening prayer, meaning that the unabridged Psalter was read/sung in its entirety once every month. Using the Sunday Lectionary is certainly easier, yet still ensures that a breadth of psalmody is encountered Sunday by Sunday.

The first aim of a liturgical year, then, is to experience a broad sweep of Scripture, including the Psalms. The second aim is to mark the liturgical seasons:

- Advent
- Christmas and Epiphany
- Ordinary Time I
- Lent
- Easter
- Ordinary Time II
- Pentecost and Trinity
- Ordinary Time III

The Church Year begins with Advent, and the intention is to observe a 4-week period of serious spiritual preparation before the celebrations of Christmas which *start* on Christmas Day. Sadly our popular culture has encouraged most our churches to make the Advent period a long sequence of Christmas celebrations, events and services, with the period after Christmas just some rather barren waste ground inhabited only by the occasional very keen church attendee. This in turn has left Advent reduced to just its first Sunday, if at all, and the associated readings and reflections on Christ's Coming and Christ's Coming Again during Sunday worship become all but overlooked.

The first proposal, then, is to use the period of Advent as an opportunity to reclaim the penitential aspect of spiritual preparation, during which time the lament psalms would make an opportune ingredient.

Later in the Church Year we have the time of Lent which, similar to Advent, is a time of spiritual preparation before a feast. In this case, the feast is Easter, and the preparation period is six weeks rather than four. Historically Easter was by far the most important season of the Church Year, with Christmas receiving scant if any attention - another way in which the Church today has largely joined the commercial juggernaut and reversed the two in importance; after all the Christmas story is far more cute and marketable than the pain and wonder of Good Friday and Easter! The historic importance of Easter was the reason why Easter Day was traditionally the day for baptisms, and so Lent the period of instruction, fasting, confession and penitence.

Lent seems to me to be marked as little more than a few Sundays around Mother's Day - itself having little regard for its historical origins. The challenges of incorporating a

theology of the Motherhood of God or the Church, never mind the inclusion rather than exclusion of the thousands of childless women who find Mother's Day the single most repulsive service in the church year, suggest that Mother's Day celebrations in their current form need urgent excision.

The Sunday before Easter always presents the option of observing either Passion Sunday (a reflection on the suffering of Christ) or Palm Sunday (a reflection on the political shot across the bows that was the entry into Jerusalem). The vast majority of Sunday-before-Easter services which I have attended or been asked to lead have been Palm Sunday ones, and the vast majority of those have required a happy triumphalism which has ignored the incendiary sub-plots. This has then led straight into a happy triumphalism on Easter Day, and so another year has gone by with hardly a single nod to the suffering of Christ, teaching on the Atonement nor time given over to spiritual 'fasting' or preparation. It makes "giving up chocolate" or "giving up Facebook" almost blasphemous in their irrelevance.

The most sacred day in the whole Christian Year, and the one which is paradoxically also the least well attended, is Good Friday. Ideally, the observation of Good Friday would begin with a solemn Thursday Evening service (Maundy Thursday meaning Ma(u)ndatum Novum or "New Commandment" Thursday - the day in which Jesus washed the disciples' feet while teaching them to love one another the same way). Jesus' own heart was full of sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane that evening as he asked his own "Why, God, Why?" questions before eventually accepting the cup of suffering "Not my will but yours be done". Then begins the relentless and unstoppable march to the Cross, the beatings, the scourging, the tormenting, and that final piercing cry of Psalm 22 "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" as Jesus' Lament on the cross.

A Good Friday liturgy which offered little more than reading a full account of Christ's Passion from one of the Gospels, plus a reading of Psalm 22, would already be considerably more than many churches observe. When I have taught about the Passion of Christ on Good Friday or Passion Sunday (when I have been able to skip the Palm Sunday 'tradition') I have received complaints about it being too graphic, or "inappropriate for the children" - despite "the children" being a couple of 2-3 year olds who were more interested in playing with a large soft dinosaur or colouring in pictures of Bob the Builder. I really wonder whether the complaints were actually the adults complaining not about the effect on the children but about the effect on them. These were supposedly mature Christians who could not confront the brutal realities of Christ's suffering and death even one day in the year, and who would far prefer to do their palm cross-waving rendition of Shine Jesus Shine before ignoring Good Friday altogether and only thinking again about coming back to Church on Easter Day when it's all over.

The second proposal, then, is for the incorporation of lament in the church's own Lenten preparation as it negotiates the chocolate-egg-supermarkets and Easter-Bunny-media that otherwise fill the run-up to Easter. If nothing else, this is an appeal for *contrast* in a world (and church) that is in danger of singing "O Happy Day" every week.

Lament In Sunday Worship

The recent shift mediated by the COVID-19 pandemic to a "new orientation" of church actually places us at a critically perfect point in our church history to make some urgent changes to our Sunday patterns. Some people are calling these new models "hybrid church" - meaning a hybrid of online and gathered communities - but what is clear is that we

have begun to normalise the use of a ‘mixed media’ approach to leading and engaging with worship.

Two of the more significant features of Hybrid Church are the use of pre-recorded elements in a worship service and the use of ‘chat’ messages during live components. When one person is preparing an act of worship for online use, they will typically insert pre-recorded songs and videos for the sung parts of the service, and use live (or pre-recorded) input for prayers, readings and preaching. Just as online worship enables curious individuals a safe opportunity to see what Christian worship is like without the awkwardness of going alone to a church service, so the incorporation of a pre-recorded Lament Psalm in an act of worship might make it easier for those watching to see what it is without any forced participation.

Secondly, for those acts of worship in which congregational text input is invited (via YouTube Live, Facebook Watch or Twitter comment for example), we start to find a way in for light-touch participation in an act of lament. Those interacting with text messages, chats, tweets or emoticons can be considered participators on their terms. Take, as a relatively safe example, a Sunday Worship lament for the broken ecological balance of our world, perhaps on a Sunday in which there is a theme of “Creation and Good Stewardship of the Earth’s Natural Resources”. Participation in the lament could then include confession (confessing our wastefulness, our excessive pollution or our unsustainable consumerism), a relevant phrase (“single use plastics” or “fossil fuels”), a simple gesture of lament (e.g. expressing sorrow for #ClimateChange) or just a plain “heart” emoji.

The first rung of participation, then, could easily be when someone at home watches an online service in which an act of lament features. The next level might be when they contribute some text response while watching at home. The next level could be when a congregation in a gathered worship environment watches a video of a lament being prayed, read, sung or otherwise performed. Another level just a little beyond this is the experience of a lament being led either by the worship leader or by a member of the congregation. Finally, at an appropriate time, a lament could be arranged in the service during which everyone is invited to participate in words, sounds or gestures.

Any of these would ideally be prefaced by some teaching, or at least some advanced notice, because abrupt changes to the worship pattern can be disconcerting for those who prefer things done "the way they've always been done" (!)

Praying Lament

Praying Lament Psalms is possibly the easiest way to use them in worship. A lament psalm can be introduced, some of the references explained (for example, "Devastation" could be used to refer to the pandemic; "my sickness" could refer by proxy to the sick person for whom we are lamenting etc).

There is nothing wrong with appropriating the Psalms for our own use in worship. That is what they are for, after all. As poetry, all the allusions in the psalms must be given specific contemporary meanings rather than left awkwardly as they are. Taking the Psalms literally rather than LITERATELY, as with any part of the Bible, never does anyone any favours.

One example might be a lament for someone who is struggling financially. We have seen that the most common lament theme is a complaint about 'the enemy'. So we take such a lament, reworking it so that we understand the "enemy" to be "debt". We can then call out to God about "the enemy pressing me in on all sides" and suddenly the whole psalm has a very relevant meaning indeed.

A ward of warning, though. Many psalms are "imprecatory" or contain imprecatory verses. An imprecation is essentially a curse - an expressed desire to see major trauma inflicted upon the enemy, or even their violent and untimely death. These words do not make comfortable reading. However, it must all be read within the context of of the original setting and style of the psalm. Simon Stocks[24] offers some helpful ways to avoid shying away from such passages.

Firstly, they are honest. Many people do feel like this at times, even Christians. Part of the fury of the lament includes our own instinctive response to the atrocity - wanting to see someone hanged for their part in a massacre for example. Rather than suppress such outbursts, and only offer God what we regard to be a 'sanitised' version of the thoughts in our heads, such language assures us that on occasion it is right to scream and shout curses like this - what we are saying is something like "If I were you God, I would strike them dead! But I am not you, so I leave the consequences in your hands"

Secondly, as befits the nature of the poetry, much of the language is figurative rather than literal (once again showing that literal interpretations are best avoided). An imprecation such as desiring "the heads of the children to be smashed against the rocks" (Psalm 137) is in

[24] (Stocks, 2007)

essence simply a desire, expressed in bloody language admittedly, that the enemy will never have any descendants and so will evaporate off the face of the earth - a request that *our* descendants will never have to suffer as we have ourselves. In a culture where ancestry and lineage were amongst the most prized assets of identity, expressing a desire that their ancestral line come to an end was an appropriate one because it was implying a desire that *our* tribe be the one that continues to the next generation, not the tribe of the enemy. It must be remembered that conquests around the world in history thought in a similar way - the invading tribe slaughtered the women and children (removing the means of reproduction) and made the men slaves; alternatively, the men were slaughtered and the women and children taken off as chattels of war. Either way, it was about end the ancestral line.

The poetic nature of the psalms also provides a third insight - that the ultimate battle is between Good and Evil in a more general sense. Evil is personified to make it easier to describe, in the same way as Ephesians 6 famously uses the metaphor of armoury to fight against the dark forces in a spiritual battle. In this way, imprecations against the (un-named) enemy are in part acknowledging the victory of God over evil which has already taken place, and which was illustrated so profoundly by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

With practice, which rightly involves hard work on our part, we can therefore open up the psalms for praying laments in a variety of ways in order to address a host of different situations. By doing so as worship leaders we are also helping our congregations appreciate the value of psalms as private prayers too. Indeed, we are presenting ways of "praying Scripture" which go way deeper than simply quoting random verses out of context.

Singing Lament

Laments can be sung, particularly when the lament is a communal one. It would be most appropriate to sing lament as a church following a community disaster such as a local murder, fire or closure of a major employer. Sometimes a sung lament feels more visceral and emotive than a spoken one, so despite a general reluctance to sing, singing may indeed be the basis of the most appropriate response to a tragedy.

Here in the West we are notoriously singing-averse, although we can find exceptions to the general rule if we know where to look. Take, for example, the 'singing on the terraces' where football and rugby fans pour out their deepest emotions in unifying singing; simple songs maybe, but belted out with such passion that they leave the singers hoarse, and no sports fan would claim that singing together has no emotional impact on them. To a similar extent, audiences at popular music events can be so vocal in their appreciation that occasionally the artist on stage will hold the microphone out over the audience for them to complete a verse or chorus. The latter style can even be found increasingly in some churches, although the distinction between worship and band fandom is more than a little murky. To be fair, the traditionalists at the other end of the scale are just as guilty of 'performer bias', when those attending are more audience than congregation, if the choir is singing Response, Chanted Psalms and Anthems on *behalf of* rather than *with* the attendant visitors. In both scenarios one must question whether those performing the worship are out of sight or taking centre stage, and to ask why this is so.

Other cultures certainly find it easier to sing spontaneously than we do. Many African countries, for example, as well as countries in South Asia, find it natural to sing in response

to present circumstances. As well as songs of joy, there are songs that tell stories, work songs, lullabies and of course songs of lament. In our ignorance here in the West we call some of these cultures “developing” or even “primitive” - yet they are the ones with the gifts and treasures of singing which we have lost, and which we are only now starting to realise to our cost and shame.

The easiest way back in is perhaps through congregational responses to a cantor. This is the model used by those leading prayer in the Taizé style, and so these could usefully be mined for their rich resources. If there is no-one comfortable enough to act as Cantor, then they could instead offer short spoken prayers between the sung responses (such as the well-known “O Lord Hear My Prayer”).

There are a few hymns of lament available, although we have seen that this is still a vastly under-represented genre. If there is a poet in the congregation, they might be encouraged to write some verses of lament which could be sung by the congregation to one of the more familiar hymn tunes. However, care must be taken to choose an appropriately solemn hymn tune to avoid a jarring of contrasting moods. Suitable tunes might include “O God Our Help In Ages Past”, “Abide With Me” or “O Sacred Head Sore Wounded”. A locally-produced lament in response to a specific local crisis would almost always be preferable to a generic one.

Churches Aiding Community Lament

Typically the church response in recent times to a community tragedy, such as a murder, a road traffic accident, an explosion, a flood or other disaster, has been simply to

open up the buildings “and create a space”. Candles, Post-It notes, paper and crayons, pebbles and gentle music might all be in the mix. Church members may even be on hand to “pray with” anyone who requests it.

There is an almost embarrassed sense that the church really hasn’t a clue what to do. The awkward silences when asked “Why did God allow this?” only add fuel to the fire of criticism that burns brightly at the perceived irrelevance of the church. More often than not, even the clergy are inadequately prepared to face the press, the public or even their own congregations.

In such circumstances the church must lead rather than accompany. We must take the lead in complaining to God that this situation is wrong, that we are not happy, and while we can’t understand it, we trust God to bring us through it, only because God has brought us through crises before. Note that we do not pretend that the situation is suddenly going to get better, nor that we are making light of the current bleak circumstances. Only that through the tears of anger and despair we can dare to look up and be confident that God is weeping with us, holding us in our pain.

Churches can and should be seen to rail against God, with the constant refrain that “This is not the way it should be”. Once again, a clear understanding must be made that the Church does not expect to be supernaturally *protected* from life’s tragedies. What it does insist, by contrast, is that such tragedies highlight the imperfections of our world and our longing for God’s Kingdom to be completed. It acknowledges that in our discomfort we need more than ever the comfort of God’s presence, in the same manner that a young adult child who has left the security of home and been hurt by a broken relationship or job crisis can

return to a parent and be held in that crisis before moving on to try again. Furthermore, it must make clear that God does not *cause* suffering, nor less *permit* suffering by God's inaction to prevent it; instead, the cries of "Why, God, Why?" are more about expressing our limited understanding of God's mysterious nature, and like Job, about us needing to place our suffering within a wider context. Through it all, we must continue to proclaim the eschatological hope in Christ of final and ultimate redemption, where death is not only defeated, but suffering in all forms is no longer part of the language.

It would be good when Church Minsters are approached by the Press for comment at a time of local tragedy affecting the whole community, for thoughts of this nature to be shared along with the more anodyne assurances of soft cushions, Post-Its and tea lights.

Conclusion

The Psalms of Lament have always formed the greater portion of the Psalter - the Prayer Hymnal of the Christian Church since its earliest days. As a hymnal, the Psalter had it all, covering the widest variety of circumstances, moods, themes and emotions - arguably more so than any hymnal since. For centuries it provided the bedrock of Christian worship, prayer and praise, even to the point of regular recitation and even memorisation by some praying communities.

In their drive to be cutting edge and contemporary (for 'contemporary' read 'any time from the 17th Century onwards') Church congregations ensured that the Psalter was gradually phased out as it was seen to be irrelevant or even embarrassing. The loss of the Psalter from Christian worship, however, has had no real benefit.

We have followed how the Psalms of Lament were picked up again and studied in their own right as a genre by the form-critical analysis in the 20th Century by the likes of Gunkel, Mowinckel, Westermann and Brueggemann, and we have seen further how the Lament category was further subdivided into laments about 'The Enemy', about 'Self' and about 'God'. We have continued with this to understand what we really mean by lament, so that we can appreciate the characteristic anatomy of a typical lament psalm.

Coming forwards into the present day we have seen examples of lament psalms being used as agents of healing and affirmation within groups of some of society's most vulnerable victims, and we have noted too how lament psalms can be used as a catalyst for social action in order to challenge injustice on both the local and the global stage.

Finally we have explored how Lament Psalms might be re-introduced into Christian Worship through prayer and song, looking both at a typical Sunday worship service and also within the overall liturgical shape of the year. We have extended this into opening the doors of the church so that the whole community can be included at times of local lament.

The Psalms of Lament have shown us a language which is in grave danger of being lost altogether. Let us reclaim that language, and with it all the resources of our own Christian heritage.

(11,700 words)

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