

17 March 2024 – About lamenting – Jonathan Williamson

This is the fifth Sunday in Lent, and it is also the Feast of St Patrick. Jonathan Williamson explores a theme that brings us to the heart of something that is an essential part of our period of Lenten reflection.

Readings:

Psalms 51: 1-13; John 12.20-33

Sermon: About Lamenting – Jonathan Williamson

I want to talk this morning about lament. Lent is a time for reflection on our relationship with God, and an opportunity to take stock of our attitudes towards others, and to acknowledge areas of our lives that we wish to address. Lament, in the strongest sense of the word, is about grief or sorrow about something, and many of us may find the psalms particularly helpful in articulating what we may feel.

Today's first reading of Psalm 51 contains many words that will be familiar with those who, like me, will recall services from the Book of Common Prayer or the Alternative Service Book. As I read this Psalm over and over again, this week, I was transported back to my 10-year-old self as a choirboy, singing the canticles at Evening Prayer at St Ann with Emmanuel, Nottingham. There was something about the regularity and familiarity of a fixed liturgy that provided comfort and structure to my awakening Christian understanding, and a structure and rhythm to my week. Granted, the theology of what I was singing was not really grasped, but even then, there was an appreciation that baring all before God was the good thing to do – to renew a right spirit within me.

This psalm is commonly known as a lament, in this case an individual one, but evidently one quite suitable to be used corporately, hence its place and value in the lectionary, and its basis in the liturgies I've already referred to. Professor John Rogerson called this psalm "the most sublime confessions of human frailty and need for forgiveness in the whole Bible", and the use of several verses in evening prayer services is testament to how it encompasses practically all the emotions one might feel when seeking forgiveness.

What I want to talk about this morning is the difference between individual and corporate lament. We will have individual sins that cause us sorrow, and we will come to God and face them. And there are corporate prayers that help us to acknowledge our own individual shortcomings. But there are also, sometimes, corporate prayers or laments which I admit make me feel quite uncomfortable. In some circumstances, or when using the words of some liturgies or corporate prayers, I find myself unable to voice them as something niggles away.

I thought about this as I read – and re-read - verse 5 of this morning's psalm:

Indeed, I was born guilty,

A sinner when my mother conceived me.

Now, the very idea of being born guilty goes against all my understanding of a loving creator, and I am much more encouraged initially by a line in another psalm – 139:

You knit me together in my mother's womb.

As I understand it, whilst the verse about being born guilty has been used by some as evidence of original sin, many have challenged this interpretation, and instead have argued that this is more about acceptance of the human condition – that we are naturally

in need of forgiveness; that we need to keep returning to God to be made whole, to be restored, to have a right spirit within us.

That makes sense to me. I have no problem with liturgies that recognise that we have fallen from the high standards expected as a response to God's infinite love for us. The wonderful use of metaphor and emotive language helps to capture the remorse I may feel at my own actions. The non-specific nature of misdemeanours means that I can state these prayers and laments with confidence. I am a miserable sinner, and the moments of quiet contemplation that we may occasionally be permitted before a service help bring those iniquities to mind in order to be faced.

What I find most difficult is when I am faced with prayers or liturgies that name specific sins which require me to apologise for things with which, as far as I am concerned, I am not complicit. What I am getting at here is when the church perceives that it has taken its eye off the ball and wishes to acknowledge it has done so through creating a liturgy or prayer that expresses sorrow. And by requiring us to voice that prayer out loud it invites me to share the guilt. And then I get all defensive – it wasn't me that denied women an equal role in the church so why should I say sorry? It wasn't me who made it difficult for black people to achieve an equal role in the church, so why should I say sorry? There is something I find irritating about someone apologising on my behalf. If I want to say sorry I want to really mean it and for it to mean something to the listener – I don't want it to be like those 'non-apologies' that have become so prevalent in modern society (I'm sorry you feel that way).

And then I remember the words from Matthew – which you will all know:

for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?'

Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

And I am slightly chastised at my failure to understand that the corporate prayers are coming from a good place, from a desire to recognise where the church has fallen short, and to return to a right relationship with God.

Now, this does not mean that I am a complete convert to the idea of corporate lament, or that I am in complete harmony with the sentiment contained in all of them. Indeed, I do personally think that many institutions, including the Church of England, are going too far in their quest to find things to apologise for. But it does make me think about my attitude towards issues that others feel strongly about and challenges my link to the corporate body.

And my takeaway from this psalm, as I read it several times, is that we are heard in our lament, we are forgiven, and that however wretched we may feel, God will renew a right spirit within us.

Amen

© Jonathan Williamson (2024)