

**Sermon: Lent 2 28<sup>th</sup> Feb 2010**

**Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**

**Phil 3: 17-4:1**

**Luke 13:31-35**

The Russian Orthodox monk, Staretz Silouan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century said this:

*“The man who has the Holy Spirit within him, in however slight a degree, sorrows day and night for all mankind”*

I wonder whether this is really true. Is this our own experience as Christians today – that we’re full of sorrow, carrying the burdens of the world on our shoulders? Should it be our experience? And how does this square with the other side of our Christian calling to be joyful in the Lord on all occasions and to live the life of abundance and freedom Jesus promised?

I want us to consider this morning the place of sorrow in our Christian lives because today’s three readings all revolve around a moment of lament:

1. In our first reading Abram bewails his lack of an heir. He voices his anguish towards God who has promised a son but who seems to be slow to act and Abram is getting desperate, and his faith and trust are being tested.

2. In the New Testament reading St Paul actually sheds tears as he writes to the Philippian Church of his sorrow in seeing people not turning to Christ but seeking their own goals and continuing to live with no reference to God at all.

3. And then Jesus, in our gospel reading, laments over Jerusalem:

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ...how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you are not willing”.*

These familiar, genuine words of sorrow from Jesus, show his compassion and love, as he recognises that the people of the city to which he is heading continue to turn their backs on God and on him, and as he is aware of the consequent fate that awaits him there.

Lament is not a common word these days, but it means to cry out in grief, to wail, to deplore, to mourn. And I think we need to get to grips with the right place for lament in our lives not just because of today’s lectionary but also because it is Lent. This season urges us to focus on the sufferings and sorrow of Christ, and to draw closer ourselves to walking the way of the cross, and to bear Christ’s pain ourselves. It is a time to realign our wills with Christ’s, including with his sorrow.

Bernard of Clairvaux, back in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, talked of the importance of committing to this in his own life and ministry in saying this:

*“I will remind myself of all the labours Jesus undertook in preaching, his weariness in journeying, his temptations during his fast, his watchings in prayer, his tears of compassion. I will also remember his sorrows, and the insults, spit, blows, mocking, rebukes, the nails and all the rest of the sufferings that rained down on him”.*

So what part should sorrow and lament play in our Christian lives today? I wonder if the normal sorts of things we get upset about are really what Silouan meant by sorrowing. I suspect, if you're anything like me, many of our sorrows are often more personal and private rather than focusing on the big issues like injustice and oppression in the world. We are sorrowful about relationships that have gone wrong, about difficulties at work or with money, about our children or grandchildren making mistakes. Even, sometimes, we are sorry for our own mistakes!!

Of the three lamenters in our readings it is only Abram who seems to be crying out for his own personal plight in this way, his lack of an heir...and yet even this is not quite as self-centered as it appears. Back in chapter 13 God had already promised Abram that he would make his descendants like the dust of the earth and make them a great nation. Isn't Abram's lament by chapter 15 simply his being honest and open before God about God's seeming failure to fulfil his promise? It reminds me of Job – wrestling with God in conversation, being honest and direct, questioning why things are as they are.

This personal sorrow that Abram displays seems rightly to be part of lament that has a place in our Christian lives today. It is not an altogether self-centered sorrow for Abram to be focusing on his lack of offspring because it is exactly and specifically aligned to God's will.

And this is the key, it seems to me, to reflecting on the place of lament in our lives today. Aren't we to lament and feel sorrow for exactly the things that are on God's heart? Aren't we, as his children, called to be of one mind with Christ, and to share those same hurts and sorrows he has? This is what St Paul meant about our being citizens of heaven rather than earth.

So, many of our personal sorrows and concerns may well be in tune with God's will, as was Abram's. God always yearns for loving, energising, committed relationships so when these run into difficulties God grieves and so should we. God yearns for relationships to be based on forgiveness and humility so when these are lacking he grieves and so should we.

But we do need, I think, to be aware of sometimes confusing these God-aligned laments we may have with other less God-centered worries. If we're honest many of the things that make us sad from day to day may reflect our own failings and worries rather than our being in tune with God's will. We need to develop the discernment to distinguish between these negative worries, which after all Jesus urged us to put to one side ("Do not worry about tomorrow") and true God-inspired sorrow and yearning for his will to be done.

We also need to be aware of the danger of being so caught up solely in our local, personal issues that we lose sight of the bigger picture, of global issues that we are called to also have on our hearts.

St Paul throughout his letters seems to carry the burden of the world on his shoulders, and in the letter to the Philippians it is no different. He sheds tears because people are turning away from Christ. Do we ever do the same today? How do we react when we read or hear of people behaving against the Kingdom values God is seeking to extend on earth? Do we feel God's pain as our own when we see or hear of injustices, oppression, poverty and hatred,

even across the other side of the world? This is a challenge to our Christian calling. We pray daily: ‘your kingdom come, your will be done’ so sorrow/lament should be a consequence in our lives wherever we see barriers to that happening whether they be because of our own collective failures or when others fail.

But though it is a challenge for us to make lament part of our Christian lives it is not such a negative one as it sounds. Such heart-felt sorrow, which is in line with God’s purposes and will, is profoundly positive. Firstly because it may help bring us to our knees a little more often, and also because it may help us to see how we can sometimes be part of the solution. But it is also positive because such lament is always shot through and balanced by trust and hope.

St Paul reminds us of this: despite his tears he is able to affirm that he trusts that God in Christ will bring about a new transformation and that his kingdom will come. Trust and expectation in God are the other side of the coin to lamenting. St Paul, despite his tears says

“He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself”.

If lament were not balance by trust and hope we may all crumble...but hope and trust turn our lament into joy and the ability to stand firm, to keep going, to still live life to the full.

Jesus, as he looks down over Jerusalem is full of sorrow for the individuals who refuse to heed God’s call to him. He carries the burden of his Father’s loving heart and can’t help but be compassionate. Yet he knows the will of his Father. He trusts God’s power to make all things new as he asserts:

*“on the third day I will finish my work”* .

And as we approach Easter, the celebration of all that was achieved on that third day, we can only say Thanks be to God! His will *will* be done, his Kingdom *will* come; and, with the Holy Spirit’s help we can therefore share both God’s sorrow but also his joy and hope.

Amen.

