



Holy Week

In the normal course of events, I would have been preparing to lead 3 bible studies next Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, with ASSF hosting a Maundy Thursday meal, the Walk of Witness and Vigil on Good Friday, a Darkness to Light service on Saturday evening and then, lastly, the Easter Sunday services as a final culmination of celebration and joy after the sadness and tragedy of Good Friday. I am, now, not doing any of that in a public sense, of course.

But that doesn't mean Easter is cancelled – far from it, this year, more than ever maybe the sadness of loss, the mourning of Good Friday, the death of God is more notable and accessible for us than ever. We will celebrate on Easter Sunday as I lead us in worship that morning, but maybe when we can eventually gather again we will appreciate afresh the new life of resurrection more powerfully. Before that, however, and despite our scatteredness, we can still share the journey of Holy Week and the Easter story by studying the same material.

So here is a set of materials to take you through the next week. Please know that you are not studying alone but as a member of the church, scattered though we are. I hope you enjoy these studies and reflections and that this Easter is a special time of knowing and meeting with God.

Every blessing,

Anne

Introduction:

So your first task is to find Lamentations! It sits between Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but is easily missed as it's short and the 2 major prophetic books either side are long.

And before we start reading, here is a **Spiritual Health Warning!!**

This is an Old Testament book – the destruction of Jerusalem and the writing of this book occurred before Jesus was born, before his life, death, trial, persecution and death, before his resurrection and ascension. We are going to start with Lamentations journey into Jeremiah, and then back to Leviticus as we head towards Good Friday. On Good Friday we will look at Sacrifice in Genesis, Hosea and then, and only then, will we move into the New Testament and the life, work and love of Jesus. But as we read these words as we explore the meaning for us now, let's **remember that Old Testament writings give us a view of God prior to Jesus!** This all happened before the working out of God's forgiveness by Jesus. Until then humankind were attempting always in and by themselves to atone for sin, to be healed from sin, to bear the cost of sin.

So, that said, let's delve into Lamentations. This is a collection of 5 poems that pour out grief and sorrow at the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC. Most of its inhabitants went into exile in Babylon.

The writer, who may or may not be Jeremiah, is clearly grief-struck and whilst he accepts they deserved this destruction, with starvation for those left and exile for those taken, he questions that it is this harsh. He sees this as God-given punishment for sin and shameful lifestyles, and swings from detailing the punishment, grieving the harshness of it and remembering that God is good.

You may like to read the book through, before delving into the studies to come. But read it without judgement bearing in mind it is the writer's response to the destruction of his home and people.



'The Prophet Jeremiah'
by Michelangelo located in the Sistine chapel

Monday: Lamentations 1-12a

Today we're going to read Lamentations 1.1-12a (so stop at the question mark in verse 12).

As you start to read this passage and before you've gone more than a sentence in, how does this seem relevant to today in this season of lock-down?

How has our village/region/nation/world changed in the last month?

What has stopped that gave us economic wealth, freedom of movement, social and welfare resources? What else has been affected?

What are we being forced to sacrifice? What is the difference being an imposed sacrifice and one you choose?

When I hear the stories of where our government are having to bring people back from I remember the joy of travel, the freedom to explore, the fascinating cultures, foods, lifestyles and beliefs that I was able to visit and experience. I loved it, but I am aware that that made us as a nation and as individuals not just British, but citizens of the world. I travelled for pleasure and short-term mission, but the same global freedoms applied to us nationally, to our economic wealth, our influence and resources, our school curriculae, and more. We were one of many nations, and now we have become like a "widow" (verse 1b) and we have been exiled and rejected, even as we reject others.

Who is rejecting who? Where have we been exiled to?

As we move onto verse 4, think about our church(es) and the festival we should be celebrating as a gathered and joyful community on Sunday. Our church will be empty and this Easter it's stones will not bear witness to shouts of joy, or hear the great story of freedom and love that reverses exile and rejection. In Lamentations, the writer laments the loss of busy economic and social life, greatness, festivals, her perceived safety that meant they could afford complacency.

What then, in the midst of this time, do you groan for, as a priest for the world?

Looking at verse 11:

What are people now searching for to give them life?

What is giving you and others you know strength to persevere and endure?

So often we find our worth, strength and wellbeing in serving others, going to work, being busy.

How are you finding your worth if you are in isolation? What is giving you strength?

Maybe meditate on Nehemiah 8.10 or Psalm 16.11. I wrote a Blog on these verses which might be helpful: <https://stlukecrosby.org.uk/joy/>

And finally, verse 12a: *'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?'*

John Pritchard writes about this verse:

'All human life is in the Bible, and this book represents one of the lowest point to which we might descend, for any number of reasons. Everything has fallen apart. Life is black. But at this point of despair, we might glimpse a deeper question..., a question that holds a vital resources. If we pause for a moment and look, we might see a cross.'

What do you do or feel when you see someone in tragedy and despair? Do you choose to carry them? Or to pass by? What is the cross you, and we as the church, have to bear at this time?

As I wonder what about these last questions, I am taken back to the story of Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Jesus up the hill. See 2 artworks representing that below for your meditation and reflection.



By De Grazia



By Saatchi

Tuesday: Lamentations 3.1a, 17-33

Verse 1 - 'I am one who has seen affliction' – think about what affliction you have seen and bring that into today's study.

The poet/prophet continues with graphic descriptions of his feelings in this time of despair. He is feeling torn apart, hemmed in, stalked, wounded by and fearful of God, who he ascribes this destruction and exile to. I don't believe that God has brought upon us this virus as a punishment or a destructive culling of the human race.

This is where we discover the different between OT and NT theology. The prophet of Lamentations ascribes this destruction as punishment for sin from God. This is in keeping with the Israelites understanding of their need to atone for their sin. Atone means to make better, pay the cost, heal the wound, bear the consequence.

Who has made the final and complete atonement for all sin?
Do we need to atone for sin? Do we need to offer blood sacrifices still?
What do we do when we make confession?

We live in the mending, payment, healing, freedom of Jesus incarnation, life and death, resurrection and ascension. How does that make you feel? Would you rather have been an OT or NT believer?

I do think the Covid-19 epidemic is a natural disaster the likes of which we have never seen before in its reaches. It has brought a national crisis not seen since WW2. Maybe people then too could echo the words of verse 17-20.

But from that place of despair and hopeless-helplessness, wondering when this and how this will end, we move to verse 21 and onwards.

Read verses 22-26 out loud to yourself – and again!! Do you need to remind yourself of these verses of hope again?

I love verse 33, and find that a comfort and peace-giving verse.

As you wait for the Lord, how are you doing that –
In fear and dismay or in trust and hope?

What do you need to live in trust and hope, if with realism?

Wednesday: Lamentations 1-2

Read these verse and then reword them from the perspective of knowing and living in Jesus. Do this before you move on!

Mine would read:

How the gold shines,
How the pure gold lights up the darkness!
The sacred stones are scattered at the head of every street,
Like candles across the landscape.

The precious children of Jesus,
Worth their weight in fine gold –
How they allow my glory to shine,
Lanterns from the potter's hand.

See 2 Corinthians 4.7-10

Turn now to Jeremiah 11.18-20:

Jeremiah was 'like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter' (v.19).

Who does this remind you of?

What is Jeremiah's response to this leading? (v.20)

What was Jesus' response to his leading to slaughter?

What will we offer in response to this epidemic?

What are we saying or thinking about our government, leaders, about decisions made internationally?

Are we offering compassionate forgiveness or calling for bitter retribution?

'For they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23.34) was Jesus' response in merciful awareness of the shortcoming of his leaders.

What do we expect of our leaders? Do we have a right to expect that? What do we do when we think they got it wrong? What do we do when they get it right?

Maundy Thursday: Leviticus 16.2-24

What do you think atonement is?

Read the biblical basis of this concept in Leviticus 16.2-24.

A large store in the United States apparently had a role of 'official scapegoat', so that when a customer complained, the scapegoat could be summoned as the offending person responsible for the fault, and so ritually humiliated and dismissed. The customer would go away, honour satisfied; the official scapegoat would await the next call of duty.

Taken from 'Reflections for Lent 2020.

What is the difference between the 2 goats in the story from Leviticus 16?

Goat 1:

What does blood represent?

And so why does slaughtering the goat make atonement?

Why is a blood sacrifice for the people's sins needed?

Who is your atoning, perfect goat?

[Blood is life, spilling it in sacrifice represents the death of those who sinned, and so with them their sin dies. They are made holy again in this ritual sacrifice].

Goat 2:

Who is Azazel?

Why is the goat sent into the desert bearing the people's sins?

What does the wilderness represent for the sins of the people that the goat carries?

[The goat is for Azazel, the devil. The wilderness or barren place is a place of no life, a place of death. The sins of the people will be hidden there in the release of the goat where it can't be seen].

Who do you make your scapegoat? Or, who or what do you sometimes make the carrier and creator of your sin?

Do you blame the devil, ill-health, another person, relationships, work, or what?

Who do we blame in public life when something goes wrong? Does blaming someone else make things better?

Would you rather have the atonement from a scapegoat, who carries your sin away into hiding, or the atonement of a sacrifice that grieves a broken a situation, pays the cost, suffers the wound, bears the consequence?

I want to ask 'What happened to our atoning lamb?' but that comes later!

So instead, ask yourself what grief, cost, wound or consequences did Jesus suffer for you on the cross and deliver you from through his death.

Good Friday: Vigil

You may like to take your cross from last Sunday morning and keep this with you as you read the following sections of the story of Good Friday.

In between each section of reading, take some time for reflection and prayer, maybe listen to a worship song or piece of music.

Psalm 22.1-12 – Isaiah 52.13-53.12

Silent reflection & Prayer

Music

Genesis 22.1-18

Silent reflection & Prayer

Music

John 18.1- 38

Silent reflection & Prayer

Music

John 18.39-19.30

Silent reflection & Prayer

Music

John. 19.31-42

Silent reflection & Prayer

Music

Hebrews 10.1-25

O God, Creator of heaven and earth:

Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath,

so we may await with him the coming of the third day,

and rise with him to newness of life;

who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God, for ever and ever. Amen.