

Singing to the Lord in Exile:

Reflection I: The Lonely City

Many of us may feel distressed or even heart-broken that we cannot gather to receive the Eucharist as members of Christ's Body. In fact, though, this experience of communal grief at disruption to worship is not something new in the story of God and His People.

In the Bible, we see this particularly in those texts written during the Babylonian exile. In 587 BC, the Babylonians - the emerging regional superpower- and their allies captured Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 25). They destroyed the Temple, which was the centre for the worship of the Lord and even the place in which He had chosen to "make His name dwell" (see Deut. 12). This was a shattering experience for the Jews of Judaea. Not only could they no longer worship God in the Temple, but many in Jerusalem had died or undergone traumatic experiences, and the city lay in ruins. Interestingly, one element of the Judeans' suffering which the Bible mentions explicitly is the physical and moral inability of those in exile to worship God through the usual songs sung in the Temple, despite the demands of their Babylonian captors for musical entertainment (see Psalm 137).

The first text which I've chosen for us to focus on is a passage from the beginning of Lamentations: a book written by someone who had recently experienced the destruction of Jerusalem. According to a Prologue found in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Bible), the author of Lamentations was the prophet Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations follows Jeremiah in modern Christian Bibles.

The opening chapter of Lamentations may be familiar to those who have attended the service of Tenebrae, which is a beautiful liturgical celebration of two parts of the Divine Office: the Office of Readings (Matins) and Morning Prayer (Lauds), which takes place during the *Triduum*. During Tenebrae, which means "darkness" and is celebrated during the night or early morning, the Office is sung whilst a series of lighted candles are extinguished, symbolising the apparent disappearance of hope during Christ's arrest and crucifixion. Although since the changes to the Office following the Second Vatican Council, Tenebrae has only been celebrated in a few Catholic churches in England and Wales, many churches still celebrate the Office on the mornings of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Yet for late Renaissance or Baroque composers in particular, Tenebrae was a highly significant part of the Holy Week liturgy, which provided the opportunity to set evocative portions of Scripture to music.

In the passage below (**Lamentations 1:1-3**), which I have translated from the Vulgate (Latin) text, we might find an echo of our own discomfort as we look out from our windows onto empty streets, unable to attend church:

1 [Prologus.] Et factum est, postquam in captivitatem redactus est Israel, et Jerusalem deserta est, sedit Jeremias propheta flens, et planxit lamentatione hac in Jerusalem: et amaro animo suspirans et ejulans, dixit:

[Aleph.] Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo! Facta est quasi vidua domina gentium; princeps provinciarum facta est sub tributo.

2 [Beth.] Plorans ploravit in nocte, et lacrimae ejus in maxillis ejus: non est qui consoletur eam ex omnibus caris ejus;

[Prologue] And it came to pass, after Israel was led into captivity and Jerusalem lay deserted, that Jeremiah the prophet sat weeping and gave this lament over Jerusalem; sighing and wailing with a bitter soul, he said:

“[Verse A] How lonely sits the city which was full of people! The Lady of the Nations has become like a widow; the Princess of the Provinces must now pay tribute.

[Verse B] She weeps constantly in the night, and tears are upon her cheeks: not one of her lovers consoles her; all her friends have spurned her and become her enemies.

omnes amici ejus spreverunt eam, et facti sunt ei inimici.

3 [Ghime].] Migravit Judas propter afflictionem, et multitudinem servitutis; habitavit inter gentes, nec invenit requiem: omnes persecutores ejus apprehenderunt eam inter angustias.

[Verse C] **Juda has gone into exile, through pain and hard labour: she lives among the gentiles and finds no rest: all of those pursuing her have caught her in the middle of her distress."**

While reading this text, it might help to listen to one of the many beautiful settings for this section of Lamentations which have been written for *Tenebrae*. Listening to Biblical texts set to music often helps us to hear the emotional tone and impact of the Biblical author's words, which we might otherwise struggle to empathise with. My own favourite setting of this text was composed by the 16th century Spanish composer, Cristóbal de Morales: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIPAyJ7-yQ&t=632s>

How might reading this passage and reflecting on Morales' setting help us to come to terms with our own situation? Firstly, we can observe the similarities between our own situation and those who experienced the destruction of Jerusalem. The author clearly finds the emptiness of the former busy city jarring, just as when we venture outside for exercise or work, we are currently struck by the emptiness of our cities. More generally, though, I think that it's interesting to see that the suffering of Jerusalem here is presented as a matter of loneliness and abandonment. Although the multiple lines of Morales' motet don't quite express the solitude, the close, even dissonant harmonies and lines which descend in pitch can help us to feel the pain which this passage expresses, which might resemble our current emotions.

It's particularly noticeable that Jerusalem, portrayed here as a Lady or Princess fallen upon hard times, is presented in v.2 as weeping yet cut off from any of her friends. In other words, in the poetic imagery which the author is using to present Jerusalem's plight, it is the *social distance or separation* of the widowed Jerusalem which compounds her distress. In the present climate, we too might feel scared or sad, and these difficulties are augmented by our separation from the loved ones whose welfare may most concern us. We too might feel as if events- in our case, a pandemic rather than an invading army- have suddenly seized us, leading us into a form of imprisonment.

Of course, we should thank God that for most of us, our situation is much less desperate than that of the Judeans during the Exile. Our social distancing is voluntary rather than forced, and our efforts at quarantine together with the work of modern scientists and doctors means that we are not helpless in our fight against coronavirus. Whilst reading this passage puts our own situation into perspective, we might also feel some comfort that our experience of loneliness in the present is not something without precedent. God's People have been here before, and perhaps crucially as we enter Holy Week, we remember that Christ also found himself seized by enemies and abandoned by his friends. The liturgy and music of Holy Week sometimes invites us to compare the abandoned figure of Jerusalem and Christ; for example one motet from the Extraordinary Form of *Tenebrae*, which was set to music by many Renaissance composers such as Victoria (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m11B9GuDUmM>), bases its text on Lamentations 1:12 and invites the listener to reflect on the sufferings of Christ, which in the original context are those of Jerusalem:

O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte: Si est dolor similis sicut dolor meus.

All you who pass by on the way, look and see if there is any sorrow like mine.

Attendite, universi populi, et videte dolorem meum Si est dolor símilis sícut dólor méus.

Look, all you peoples, and see if there is any sorrow like mine.

The second point that I'd like to note is that, as the Prologue to the text explains, this is a *lament*, an expression of personal grief. And although in this case the expression of grief comes from an individual, Morales' polyphonic composition with its various vocal parts helps us to see that the author is giving his lament on behalf of the whole people. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, we find communal expressions of grief at the exile. Psalm 79, for example, brings the destruction of Jerusalem before God with a particularly graphic description of corpses littering its ruins. The significance of this, I think, is that the Bible allows us the space to pour out our distress before God, both as individuals and members of the Church which is suffering across the world. As Simon Hewitt recently explained in his Year of the Word lecture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmIkF1Em2QA>), the psalms of lament give us permission to express our negative emotions, although modern culture often encourages us to suppress them and to present a cheery face to the world. God allows us to bring our pain and suffering to Him, even when expressed in confusion or disappointment.

Finally, though, it is worth remembering that the Exile was only temporary. God did not abandon His people in Exile, but brought them "comfort", leading them back from Babylon even as he had released their ancestors from slavery in Egypt (see Isaiah 40ff). Eventually, the Temple was re-built, and God's people rejoiced to see worship resumed there (see Ezra 3). Even more importantly, the Temple of Christ's body was not left destroyed, but was itself "rebuilt" in three days (John 2:19), allowing Christ to enter Heaven as a priest who always prays to the Father on our behalf (see Hebrews 7). We can be confident that God longs for us to worship Him properly, and that we will have an opportunity to do so once more.

In the meantime, though, many of God's People continued to trust that He would deliver them from shame and exile. The beginning of Psalm 89, another expression of grief at God's apparent abandonment of His covenant with David's royal line, begins by expressing the intention to praise God's covenant faithfulness:

"I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations". (Psalm 89:1)

Perhaps like the original Psalmist, we might find this a difficult sentiment to express, finding God's providence harder to discern at present. Like the Psalmist, we might wonder:

"How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?" (Psalm 89:46)

But although bewildered at God's lack of intervention to save Israel, the Psalmist continues to proclaim God's faithfulness. Through reading the Psalms, this is something that we can and should, if we are able, do likewise. If you are struggling to praise God, perhaps this calm and confident Taizé chant might help. Personally, I find that the steady rhythm and united voices help to show what unity and trust in God looks like, even if I am unable to feel that same calmness myself:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1LLxCEa7IU>

***Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo
(from Psalm 89:1)***

I will sing of God's mercy for ever