

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme
8. Meditation on Lament

Practical theologian and educator Revd Canon Dr Carla Grosch-Miller shares her reflections on lament.

This morning - as I dutifully engaged in my daily exercise - I walked past a train speeding from Morpeth towards London. I noticed, as I have for the last several weeks, that it was virtually empty. Coach after coach of empty seats, a shadow (a person?) in one. I nearly burst into tears. And I realised that I was holding a deep reservoir of feeling that I did not want to tap into.

My head had been telling me that I was struggling to write this reflection - because brains that are searching for safety and predictability, brains that hum with a fear barely discernible to the naked ear, have a hard time engaging all their cognitive function. But the answer was in my heart. The reason that lament felt unavailable to me at this point in the pandemic is that I am not ready to go there. It's not (just) an intellectual thing: it's an emotional one.

Lament is the ravaged heart's cry to the source of her being, the inconsolable ranting that reaches out to demand an end to suffering, the fierce force of living in the face of death that turns towards God in irresolute hope.

In the Bible, God is spoken of as the One who hears our cries (Exodus 3:7). The first and only person to name God, Hagar, names God *El-roi* - *God who sees* or *God of seeing* (Genesis 16:13). If only God will hear and see us, surely God will respond. Surely.

The ancient prayer book that is the Book of Psalms contains nearly all the emotions known to humankind. Over one third of the psalms are psalms of lament, personal or communal. God is raged at, castigated, blamed, entreated, begged. Complaints are lodged in detail: God has failed to act; or acted too harshly; or allowed the wicked to prosper. Revenge is courted. Blood is willing to be spilt. Look now at the Revised Common Lectionary - few of these psalms are included. In the comfort of our Western churches, we are embarrassed about the emotion; we find the rawer parts of our nature distasteful; and we think that Christians shouldn't have, or admit to, such feelings. Yet there they are, in black and white and red.

Lamentation is an expression of pain, an articulation of what's happening now. It is a part of a healing journey which in time, a long time, integrates the experience into our life story.

In our secular world, we find it easier to complain about the government: its response was too slow; the most vulnerable have been ignored; what's the exit strategy? With 20/20 hindsight, we can think of and gripe about one hundred and one things that have not been done right. I wonder if this is a displacement activity. A way of trying to manage the deep anxiety and fear that is thrumming through our bodies. The means of keeping uncontrollable feelings under wraps, in the pretence that we are coping, really we are.

What would happen (*if we are ready, only then*) if we used the age-old Judeo-Christian practice of lament? If we lanced the boil and put the whole mess in God's hands, God who created this world and gave us the insane freedom to muck it up in the first place?

If you are ready to lament, here is a structure adapted from John Swinton in *Raging with Compassion* (Eerdmans, 2007, p. 128). The structure is derived from the structure of the psalms of lament.

1. Address God using any names or titles that speak to you or express qualities of God that you want to call upon. You can use many names.
2. Make your complaints and be detailed. (Consider how detailed the Book of Lamentations is.) What has happened? Who is hurting and why? Whose fault, if anyone's, is it? Give God the full blast of your anger, hurt and fear.
3. Express trust in or relationship with God. This can be one sentence. See, e.g., Lamentations 3:24 '*The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in God.*'
4. Make an appeal or petition.... a request for God's intervention and why it is needed.
5. *Optional*: Vow your praise. Terrible things have happened, *and yet* I will praise You.

This last step is optional because the lament must be true to where you are in the moment. Many of the psalms of lament include a vow of praise. There is a scholarly debate about why that is. Some consider the vows to be later additions. Others consider the psychology of lament - how expression of pain moves us along and enables us, in time, to praise. The important thing is that lamentation be authentic. If you are not ready to praise, you are not ready.

No doubt there are people who are ready to lament now, who can face God with the full force of their pain. God bless you if you are such a one; God bless and sustain you. And then there will be people like me, who can't yet count the losses that are mounting up or face into the abyss of fear. God bless and sustain us too.

God bless and sustain us all.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please email nicolacanh@chichester.anglican.org - Head of the Wellbeing for Clergy (WCF) service for the Diocese of Chichester or St Luke's via its website or on 020 7898 1700.

This article appeared first on the Tragedy and Congregations website <https://tragedyandcongregations.org.uk/2020/05/10/meditation-on-lament-by-carla-grosch-miller/>.