

## Sermon on John 16: 20-23

### How Long?

**Now is your time of sorrow, but I will see you again and you will rejoice.**

In time of great sorrow, there is still hope, for a new day will dawn.

Jesus is alive.

Death will be no more, and darkness will turn to light.

But sorrow may endure sometime yet.

The clouds of unknowing may gather round us still and linger.

And all may appear to be lost and lonely.

Can we sing the glory of the Lord, even in the bleakest times?

In the midst of despair, personal or global, can we locate the hope of Christ standing in our company?

Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord?, said the psalmist.

Sometimes it causes me to tremble?

Can we be faithful in lament, even as we look for a new vision of hope?

**In times of great sorrow the Hebrew people would cry out in lament.**

How can this be O God?

Why do the innocent suffer and the evil prosper?

How long, O Lord, must we wait for justice to roll down like the rivers?

The psalms are full of it.

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?, became a cry of lament in a different time of great sorrow.

‘How long, Lord, must I call for help’, cried the prophet Habukkuk, ‘but you do not listen?’

Or cry out “Violence!”, but you do not save?’

**In certain traditions it has sometimes been considered a mark of unfaithfulness to make such harrowing cries to God.**

As if it reflects in some way a lack of trust.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Why would we cry out if it was not with the expectation that in God’s Kingdom things ought to be different?

Why would we cry out if it was not with the belief that God could bring change?

Why would we look on the sufferings of the world and not have our hearts broken when we believe every single person is beloved of God and made in God’s image?

Lament, a tradition of prayer which in the Hebrew Bible includes aspects of invocation, complaint, of confession of trust, petition and thanksgiving, is that which is drawn from a people of longing.

We long for God’s kingdom to come and make all things right.

We long for an end to worldly suffering and pain.

We long for our own brittle lives to be engulfed with the hopeful presence of the risen Christ.

And that the hope of resurrection would come to fruition soon.

Soon, and very soon, we are going to see the King, we want to sing.

Jesus sees and knows this longing in his troubled disciples... your grief will turn to joy, he says.

This time will pass and the Kingdom will arrive.

Joy cometh in the morning, when the light of day breaks forth on a darkened world.

What more faithful response could there be than the cry of lament?

The lament which carries with it the latent belief that in God’s Kingdom things should be different?

Why, O Lord? Why?

How long will we wait?

How long will we suffer?

Crying out to God is not a mark of falling away, but rather of deep trust in a loving God.

**It was a freezing cold day up in the mountains as we came together to give over into God's hands a tiny little baby which had died in the womb at 28 weeks.**

The cold bore in around us as if death blew in the bitter breeze, a reminder of the oftentimes tragic world we inhabit.

It was very cold, and somehow that seemed appropriate.

The wind caught our tears which lingered briefly on our cheeks before blowing away.

It was a simple ceremony.

A few prayers, a couple of songs.

We spoke of the love of God, even amid death.

Blessed be your name we sang, as if this little 28 week old baby was as precious to God as any that had ever lived.

And of course he was.

The scene was one of lament from beginning to end.

Why? Why has this happened?, seemed the most telling and obvious question.

There was no answer which would suffice.

No pithy assurance.

No theological aphorism that would fill the void and explain things neatly.

The urge we feel in such times to offer easy answers should be resisted.

It is not helpful.

And while it may emerge from faithful intent to be of comfort, we may in our will to be faithful, fail to be, by believing we need to take control.

Maybe sometimes we do much better to simply sit with the pain, allow others to sit with it too.

To let it be so.

In a strange way to honour it for what it is, and not seek to 'solve' it too easily, as if it were a math problem.

Sometimes attentive silence, deliberate non-speaking, is the best way to 'say' something.

### **It was hard and painful.**

Yet God was there, in the love of those present, in the powerful prayers and affirmation that God sits in the pain with us all.

That our heartbreak is itself a sign of love.

After all we would not hurt if we did not love.

Jesus too cried out to God from the cross.

The lament of that day and that time has carried on in the lives of our friends, a beautiful and faithful Christian couple who have gone on to have another child who is lively and healthy.

But the very vitality of her little beaming life only sharpens the question.

Why? Why, O God?

This is a faithful cry of lament.

A lament of trust and confession in the God of love.

It reflects the pain of realised loss, while believing firmly that God's new order will break through at some point, in some way.

Probably when we least expect it.

There will be joy breaking forth from sorrow.

Hope will rise from the grave.

Death will not have the final answer.

**Perhaps no Christian people has given the world a more powerful sign and subsequent tradition of this than the African American slaves of the deep south.**

How can a community retain hope over generations of enslavement and torture we ask incredulous?

How can it keep on walking in the face of such despair?

It surely can only be through faith in a God who would set things to right.

Through a fierce trust that this present evil is not what God intends.

That in this life or the next, God would vindicate his people.

He would liberate them.

It's no wonder the slaves identified so strongly with the stories of the people of Israel in exile, and their exodus into the promised land.

'Let my people go.'

'Deep river, my soul longs after Jordan.'

As we are all aware, it was in great part through music that they sang of the freedom they believed would come.

That they sang freedom itself, they sang themselves into hope, even while still enduring captivity.

Reflecting on the powerful place music has played in the identity and life of African American people, James H Cone says of himself, '... my life is a spiritual.'

Theirs was not a neatly honed list of theological treatises, played out in the abstract world of academia.

It was a cry and a longing forced to the surface from the depths of their souls by their harrowing experience, yet reflective of deep trust and faith.

This would mean many of their spirituals reflect simultaneously the ‘troubles’ of life, and the overwhelming sense of the glory of God, just like so many of the psalms.

‘Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.’, in one breath, ‘Glory, Hallelujah!’, in the next.

The whole world has received out of their faithful lament, a lament struck into song, one of the great traditions of Christian music.

Every time we sing Amazing Grace, for instance, we do well to remember we are giving voice to the tradition they have handed down.

Written by the former slave ship captain John Newton he set his hymn to a tune he probably heard coming up out of the bowels of one of his ships.

It sounds very much like a West African sorrowing song.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.*

*That saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost, but now am found.*

*Was blind, but now I see.*

**Like Paul, Jesus employs the metaphor of a woman giving birth to describe this sense of the movement from sorrow to the joy of the new world breaking into things.**

‘A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.’

Given Jesus was a man speaking to men, I somewhat hesitantly asked Lucy how well the experience of childbirth worked in this metaphorical way...where husbands, if not angels, fear to tread you might say.

She responded by saying she reckoned Jesus had done pretty well.

While, sadly, we know that in the world not all children who are born live on, or are loved and cared for, as an image it works.

For me being present at the birth of my children was a great privilege and a time when emotion just seems to come upon you almost without you noticing it.

But as the one looking on, each time (and I’m getting pretty good at it now!!) I felt pretty helpless.

At least looking from the outside the, pain, the struggling to breathe, the effort, all seemed immense.

A time of great struggle and there's no other way through.

Yet when the child is born, it is amazing how immediately in those moments all of that tense experience seems to wash away in the presence of the new life in your midst.

The child is born, clutched to its mother's chest, and begins to breathe into a whole new life.

The rush of air into her tiny lungs means there can be no turning back, the path and direction are set towards life, and it is into life with all its challenges and complexities she will walk.

**Lament could well be a part of the calling of the church at this present time.**

Death stalks around the world everywhere, hate, violence.

So often it's the innocent who suffer.

We can't imagine a lot of it, yet it's as real as the comfortable and safe context we live in here in Bowral.

Like Habukkuk we may too want to cry out to God, 'I cry violence, but you do not save.'

We've had enough of the sorrow, Lord, let things turn to joy.

Some of you may have heard the story of Canon Andrew White, the Vicar of Baghdad. He's the minister at St George's, the only Anglican church left in Iraq.

He works with a local community constantly under threat where its members live with the very present danger of death.

In his book 'Faith Under Fire' he details how recent converts would be targeted and killed, how they needed to arrange protection for their pastors so they weren't kidnapped.

Yet somehow they sought to love and care for the suffering people of that war riddled nation.

Through it all he seeks after peace.

I'm sure that through the long, long months, the innumerable challenges, his faith has brought him many times to cry out in different ways.

Yet at the same time he can write this, *'Despite the fact that St George's is constantly under fire, it is the happiest church I have ever served in. We may be beset by huge problems, but we also have huge joy because the Lord does meet all our needs and our faith gives us hope in tragedy.'*

Your grief will turn to joy.

**We do well to remember that since the time of Christ, the church has looked with faithful expectation to the day of the Lord when Jesus would return and set all things to right.**

Some have dismissed this expectation, but it is the hope which has borne the people of God through every age, through great pain.

This expectation is infused throughout the spirituals and knitted into the community of Christians praying, witnessing, worshipping in the heart of Baghdad, Iraq.

It is sewn deep into the lives of our friends coping every day with the pain of a lost child.

We are no different.

We too must lean forward into God's glorious future, and pray that in more and more ways it would break through into the present.

We are called to be a part of that breaking through, to do our part, to sing the song of hope in our own setting.

Perhaps it's good to be reminded that lament can be a faithful part of this vocation.

Why, O Lord? Why? How long?

Why does evil prosper and innocents suffer? Why? How long must we wait?

'So with you', Jesus says to the disciples, 'Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice and no-one will take away your joy.'

God's final word to us in times of great trial comes through Jesus' words.

'I will see you again, and no one will take away your joy.' No-one. Amen.