



Lament for Nice

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Psalm 55.1-8; Matthew 11.7b-14

The horror of events in Nice strikes most of us in a place deeper than words, a sense of primal fear at the thought, not just of death, but of sudden, violent, deliberate, crushing and irrational mayhem – a kind of utter chaos, impossible to understand and wholly alien to the rhythm and purpose of our lives.

If we know someone close to the events, or if we've experienced anything like it ourselves, the likelihood is we'll be thrown into the whirlwind of intense emotion, visceral reaction, and fervid anxiety. If we're watching from afar, we may be drawn into more cerebral engagement – what could make someone do such a thing, how could something like that be stopped, is there anything we can do to help, might such an event happen in my neighbourhood, what is happening to the world?

All of these questions evoke a profound feeling of powerlessness. Over the last two centuries we've known a whole series of inventions and discoveries that have led to a greater ability to control and shape the world, and in the last generation a huge leap in communications technology to enable us to be in touch with people almost everywhere. But this senseless violence, this rampage inflicted on happy citizens enjoying their national day – summed up by that harrowing photograph of a child lying in the road as lifeless as the doll in her hand – renders us impotent in comprehending, addressing, responding. Many suspect that military intervention ignited, even unleashed terror in Iraq and Syria; but those who've attacked France have done so from within. What do these people want – and how on earth is this ghastly carnage going to help them get it?

Deep in the soul of the Old Testament lies a practice that shapes the reflexes of a people. That practice emerges when two contradictory convictions face off against each other. Conviction one is that God has no character that's not entirely about justice, mercy, love, and truth. Conviction two is that what you're experiencing right now is injustice, cruelty, evil and agony. The two realities are in what feels like absolute tension. And the result is what's called lament. Lament is the practice of prayer that acknowledges the depth and damage of sin, yet looks to God to account for what goes beyond that depth and damage and still weighs down creation in ways that can in no imaginable degree honour the glory of God. Lament comes from a place of deep trust in the faithfulness of God and deep awe at the mystery of humankind, which finds itself dismayed at the deep disgrace of events that surely reflect neither God's character nor God's will.

Lament says, 'How can this be? The world was made to mirror God's glory. But this is shame and suffering and horror and grief. My head can't comprehend it, my heart can't cope with it, my soul can't sustain it. God, as you have time beyond time, show me how I can go on, how I can live, with you, with myself, this hour, this day, ever again.'

The prophet Habakkuk begins his oracle from a place of lament. It's the deepest place of honesty, dismay and faith, all wrapped into one. Because it's about faith, there's still a strand of hope running through, even amid the depth of woundedness and bewilderment. Habakkuk says, 'O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me... the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted. Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told.'

Habakkuk recognises he's out of his depth. This situation is way beyond his competence, command, or even comprehension. And so he places it squarely in God's lap. By putting his dismay into words, Habakkuk attempts to make it less terrifying; by giving it a name he gives it a shape and a structure; by dredging it up from the bowels of his soul and looking at it in the light of day he lessens its primal power over him.

Lament is a community event. When I lived in North Carolina in a community that frequently lost members to the curse of gun violence, we would gather together on the site of the killing and speak words of lament, bewailing the murder, longing for God to be close, standing in solidarity with the grieving. Sometimes you could still see the blood on the tarmac from where a death had occurred. One person described it in six powerful words: 'Show up, know nothing, expect healing.' The prayer was simple. God, who turned the horror of the cross into a gift of hope, by some mystery we cannot currently see and can scarcely even imagine, turn this atrocity into something that speaks of your beauty, your truth, your glory.' But such a prayer doesn't expect to be answered instantly. What needs to happen first is for the mourners to know how deeply God understands, shares, and enters into their despair.

One night a woman walked into a church, heavyhearted and full of anger and grief at the sin and suffering of the world. There was a candle stand, and she was just striking a match to add a prayer of her own to those that were burning with fragile hope. She heard a shuffling in the darkness at the back of the church. She walked gently towards it, and the pierced hands and scarred face of the stooped person told her she was looking at Christ himself. Christ answered her mystified stare: 'Who can bear to see my tears? I can't show them to the world. The world only wants me for what I can give it. Who can bear to see what love and life cost me?'

And she left that church, and she looked again at the horror of so many tragedies, and resolved to become, through the honesty, dismay and faith of lament, a person who could bear the tears of Christ. Maybe we could do the same.

A Lament

O LORD, how long?

How long will we hear of those celebrating a national day being ruthlessly slaughtered?

How long will your children dancing and relaxing be blown to high heaven?

How long will Baghdad be a byword for mutilation and hatred?

How long will those in a concert hall be powerless victims of murder and cruelty?

Do you not listen?

Do you not see our sufferings?

Do you not bleed with our blood, cry with our tears, hurt with our pain?

We know you will one day bring justice like a never-failing stream;

We believe you will at the last vindicate the oppressed;

We trust that you will at the end of time raise the downtrodden from the dust.

But why will you not do it now? We need it today, Lord. People are howling in anguish that you may meet them in their sorrow and lift their hearts to a new dawn.

What is happening with these extremists? What possesses them to disgrace their own religion and break the hearts of so many people? Can you not bring them face to face with your mercy and compassion and turn their hearts to the ways of gentleness and the paths of peace?

We are tired, we are weak, we are worn; precious Lord, take our hand,
lead us on, help us stand.

Bless the peacemakers

Bless the ones who forgive the unforgivable

Bless the ones who refuse to return hatred for hatred

Bless us, Lord, who long for your peace.

Gracious God, hear these prayers of your children.