



21st Sunday after Trinity | Sermon (Gospel: John 5:36b-47)

And he began to shout out: 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy upon me'

When we think there is something wrong with someone we know, we usually ask, 'What's the matter with you today?' That question provides the opportunity for the other person to express in language, what, if anything, is wrong.

But there are some people whose suffering is so extreme that they cannot speak. We have seen pictures of people on television whose families have been killed, whose homes have been destroyed, who have been left isolated in their suffering. They sit on the ground, head in their hands, preoccupied with their own pain and loss. Their suffering has left them numb and mute. Before that extreme suffering, we feel helpless, it seems senseless to say anything at all.

The first step towards overcoming this suffering is to find a language that leads a sufferer out of silence, a language for pain and fear and loss. One of the great teachings of biblical tradition is that people should express their suffering in lamentation, not repress it in brooding silence. Remaining silent is remaining hopeless, for there is no belief in the possibility of change.

It is not surprising therefore that there are so many prayers of lamentation throughout the history of God's people. Lamentations are cries from the heart, shouts of suffering, groans of anguish, screams for help. They are written on a bed of pain, but they express the hope that things will change, that God will listen. Lamentation is the voice of suffering.



From Psalm 6: 3-7

Have mercy on me, Lord, I have no strength....

I am exhausted with my groaning;

Every night I drench my pillow with tears;

I bedew my bed with weeping.

My eyes waste away with grief;

I have grown old surrounded by my foes.

The expression of suffering is intended to be more than just self expression; it is made out of hope that things can change. Lamentation, therefore, is not pessimistic; it refuses to remain powerless and passive, so it expresses its longing for change. The prayer of lamentation makes a bridge between silent endurance and change. And that can be seen vividly portrayed in today's Gospel.

Here we see Jesus leaving Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd, probably pilgrims, travelling to the holy city for Passover. When the blind beggar Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is so near, he shouts his prayer of lamentation ...'*Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me*'.

Some of those following Jesus resent this disturbance, so they tell this one man uproar to keep quiet. No permission to scream; no permission to find a language for suffering. They represent the school of thought which is content to leave the afflicted to suffer in silence, no doubt in the belief that this is a religious response to suffering.

Without the capacity to communicate his suffering, the blind man will continue to inhabit his world of darkness.



He knows that there is going to be change, he must communicate his loss to Jesus. So he screams his lamentation. It stops Jesus in his tracks, and he tells the crowd to minister to this blind man by calling him over. The crowd changes its tune; Courage – they say. ‘Get up’ he is calling you. Jesus asks the question of questions ‘*What do you want me to do for you?*’ When the blind man finds a language for his loss, Jesus heals him and compliments him for a faith that saved him. Saved by faith, he uses his new sight to follow Jesus along the road.

The healing in the Gospel takes place as a result of the prayer of lamentation. That prayer expresses the pain and the faith of Bartimaeus; he believed in a God who pays attention.

Why bother screaming if you believe that no one is there to pay attention? Bartimaeus focused on Jesus, ignoring all other advice. He gave his unmixed attention to Jesus. And Jesus returned the compliment.

If we have been brought up to believe that the religious response to suffering should be silence and passivity, then we will find the prayer of lamentation a subversive act. But the loss of that prayer is the loss of a language for our suffering, the loss of a faith that desires to speak honestly to God. When Jesus reaches the end of his road, he will use the prayer of lamentation in the garden of Gethsemane. There, on the ground, he will find a language for his own pain and loss and fear. The good news is that the Father hears that prayer of Jesus. Lamenting is not a useless exercise; it is a prayer which reaches the heart of God.

Amen