

18th April 2021 10 am Transform: Lament

Service led by Karen Mills, Talk by Kim Matthews, Reading by Jennifer Matthews
This transcript is only of the readings, the talk and the prayerful reflection.

1st Reading: Psalm 42 [NIVUK1984]

- 1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?
- 3 My tears have been my food day and night,
while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
- 4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.
- 5 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.
- 6 My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar.
- 7 Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers have swept over me.
- 8 By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song \is with me – a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"
- 10 My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
- 11 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

2nd Reading: James 4:7-10

- 7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Talk

[Kim Matthews:]

Thank you, Jenny. So, good morning. As Karen as said, this morning's focus is on Lament, which we might think of as outpouring of negative feelings or emotions to God.

So a dictionary definition includes two useful but slightly different alternatives. Lament can be:

- a passionate expression of grief or sorrow
- or a complaint

And I think in the context of the Bible, all three of those are part of what our lament is: grief, sorrow and complaint.

We can think of it perhaps, as a Biblical Lamentation, as a "large religious 'ouch'"



Just to give you a little outline of where we're going to go this morning in this talk, just so you know where I'm taking you,

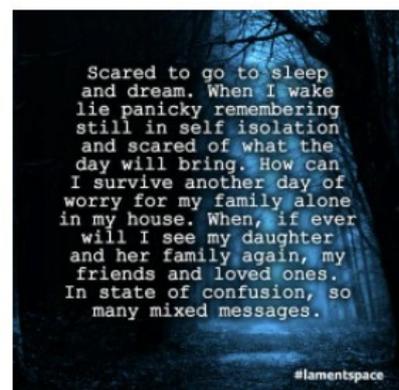
- I'm going to give a brief introduction to the topic,
- tell you something of my story, partly for context but partly perhaps to encourage others to share their stories as well over the coming days and weeks,
- and then I shall talk about lament in the Bible and some modern examples of that,
- and then ultimately, what it means for us.

I don't promise that this will be necessarily cheerful, this isn't intended to be entertainment, but it is an opportunity for us to come honestly before God as you are, and tell Him what we're feeling, and accept the need for others to do the same.

When Andrew first asked me to do this talk, I thought, "Yes, I'd quite like to share what I've been learning about this with other people, but then I thought, "But this is the season just after Easter, we're supposed to be celebrating Resurrection and something of God's joy." But then as I started to prepare I thought, "Well, as we're coming out of lockdown (as Karen has said and I'll refer back to) there are perhaps lots of things that we want to bring to God that have come out of the pandemic." And then of course in the last week, we've been mourning Prince Philip's death, the nation and beyond has mourned the loss of a man dearly loved. So maybe now is the time to bring those negative feelings before God, and to honestly reflect on how we feel.

You might be sitting at home wishing, "Oh, I wish I'd just put some worship songs on and was expressing my joy to God." And if that's how you're feeling, if you're really joyful at the moment that's great, but it would be good if you could stay with us this morning because I think the rest of us probably need you more than you know. If however you're feeling uncertain, a bit down, miserable even, or just plain angry with God, then you're in good company, and I hope that that today will help you express that to God in a constructive way.

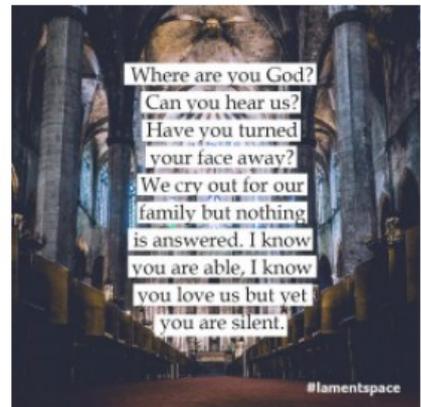
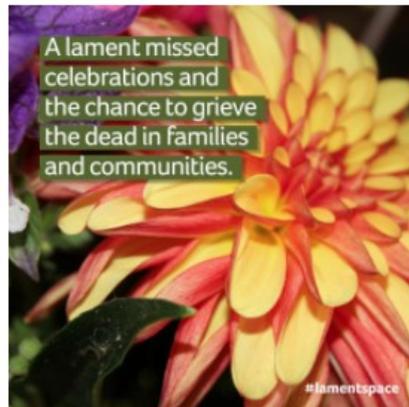
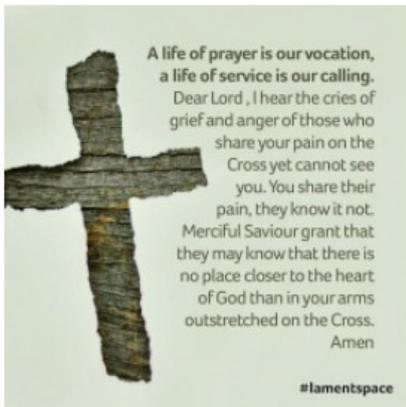
So if you're still with me, how are you feeling? The next slide's got a few examples that CMS have gathered, and if you want to go to the website there's lots and lots of material there, people expressing their lament.



[more on next page]

I was listening to the radio a few days ago and there were people there sharing their different experiences, their hopes and concerns at a very human level, of coming out of the restrictions: introverts' fear of re-engaging with other people, having not not been with others for a while; extroverts' excitement of exactly the same thing!

All of our experiences have been different, and some have more time, been able to draw closer to God, others have been busy working at home, exhausted by constantly staring at a screen, and seemingly endless meetings.



For some, the communication of email and WhatsApp are a lifeline for sharing their lives with others; for others, they can feel like another wave of communication that adds to the stress. Some have enjoyed more alone-time, got on top of the garden and the DIY, while others have really craved the buzz of being with their friends. Some, as Karen was saying, have missed the chance to meet or spend time with new grandchildren, maybe mourning the loss of friends or family members, or just simply regretting a lost year. Some have lost their income and struggled to make ends meet, while others have accumulated savings because there is less to spend their money on.

It's been different for all of us. So whatever you've experienced or however you feel, it's OK, and this morning is about taking time to lament that which has been lost, or those things in the world that cause you pain and frustration.

The next slide is a picture of my parents. I've chosen a picture from before I was born because I can look at that without getting overwhelmed with emotion, because it's perhaps slightly more distant to my experience of them. I'm going to share something of my story for context; it may appear slightly self-indulgent, but I think I would like to encourage by way of example, encourage you all to share your own stories of how you're feeling and how your experience has been over the last year, as we come back together.



Dad died on 10th January 2019, and my sister and I supported Mum in our different ways, dealing with the will and Mum's finances (which Dad had always done).

And we hadn't even sorted out all of Dad's things when just over a year later (and this was just before lockdown) on 5th March 2020 I took Mum to Oxford for a

hospital appointment, and as I look back, that was the start of a painful journey, painful for her but also for the rest of the family, involving several drastic surgical interventions which ultimately failed to prevent her death, on 2nd August.

Throughout this time, my work continued, and throughout all of the pandemic, and I'm grateful for that, but it does mean I'm spending every day in front of the computer and much of it in on-line meetings. I have found this tiring, and I've struggled to have the same enthusiasm for the things I normally look forward to in the evenings – because they've also moved on-line and it can feel just like more of the same.

And then alongside that, my sister and I have been dealing with Mum's estate, cleared the bungalow which they've lived in for 53 years: there was a lot of clearing out, I can tell you.

And of course, as a team, we've had quite a bit to do as Wardens, working out how we deal with the church situation during this time.

So, my experience of the pandemic can be described as busy and rather miserable at times!

But I don't want to give the impression it's all been bad. We've developed a routine which involves more time together with the family; I try very hard to turn the laptop off at nine o'clock every evening so we have some time together at the end when I'm not looking at a screen, unless we're in another Zoom meeting, of course; we've become closer to friends; and I've enjoyed spending some time in the garden every day before starting work instead of my usual cycle, and the garden is looking better than it ever has.

But what about my relationship with God through all this? So just before Lent last year, I felt God's prompt (initiated through something Mary Rai said at an 8 o'clock communion service) to address historical family links with Freemasonry, and I received some very helpful prayer support as I sought to cut off any influence the Devil may have over me or my family from past family activity (including my Dad). And at the same time, I addressed some other wrong things that I needed to deal with in my own life.

I was called to fast every Friday through Lent as I put my relationship back on track with God, and the Retreat in Daily Life is really helpful, as well as a feature of putting Jesus back at the centre.

A year on, this Lent, I felt I should again fast every Friday, but I thought I felt God say that last year was about me pursuing my relationship back on track, whereas this year was a bit more about the needs of others. And I was drawn to this material [Lament for Lent], and the CMS actually produced it for Lent 2020, but they put it back out again in 2021, feeling that it was still very appropriate. And I found it really helpful. And it's what I've learned from that experience that I want to draw on this morning.

So I find it really helpful to focus on lament as a means of addressing my own sorrow, but also expressing sorrow for the state of the world.

So Lament in the Bible...

- comes from confidence in God,
- the heartfelt expression of our feelings,
- crying out for God's intervention.
- But be warned, it may result in change, or having to take action!



What do I mean, 'lament comes from confidence in God'? Surely if we trust in Him, we should know His joy, have confidence in the future born out of our hope in Him, and the world's problems will just fade away?! And of course there is of course, some truth in that. So we read in Philippians 4:4 [RSV]:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

but it is not the whole picture.

Even we have God's Joy in our hearts, I don't think that happiness is a true picture of how the Bible describes our relationship with God. Think about the Psalm we had this morning: Psalm 42 was one of 60 Psalms of Lament (four out of every ten of the Psalms is a Psalm of Lament), and then we have the book of Lamentations, (clue in the title), the Prophets - many of whom lamented or shouted out to God, and there's the story of Job. So there's lots of examples in the Old Testament, of bringing negative feelings before God.

And then there's Jesus Himself. He knew the pain of loss. Even though He knew (well I think it seems He knew) that He was going to raise His friend Lazarus back to life - He wept when he died.

So we read from John 11:

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. **34** "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Jesus was not just upset at a personal level. He also expressed His sorrow, especially for the City of Jerusalem. So in Luke 13 we read the words of Jesus Himself,

34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. **35** Look, your house is left to you desolate.

And then as He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus was again deeply moved: We read in Luke 19:

41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it **42** and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.

I wonder what Jesus feels now as He looks over our town, our country, our world.

- I believe His heart is filled with sorrow still for those who are hurting and do not know Him.
- And do we, do I, I wonder, share that sorrow?

And of course, Jesus cried out to God bitterly in the Garden of Gethsemane before His arrest.

And then on the cross, Jesus cried out again to God, quoting from Psalm 22 (another of the Psalms of Lament),

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It's a great Psalm, by the way, I suggest you read it all in the context of Jesus' story.

So, if Jesus, who knew the Father intimately and gave Himself utterly to His Father's will, expressed sorrow and pain to Him, surely so too can we.

Before we turn back to the Psalms, which are a huge resource for this kind of prayer, let me just refer again to our New Testament reading. Clearly James is talking about a different kind of sorrow, remorse for sin, but I think also this can be addressed in the same kind of coming to God, and again we see it's not an immediately joyful thing, turning back to God for our sin involves grieving, mourning and wailing as we come before God in sorrow for what we have done. So as Jenny read in James 4:7,

Submit yourselves, then, to God.

And then in verse 9,

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

So there clearly is a biblical place for sorrow and lament. But how do we do this in a constructive way?

I'm going to look at Psalm 13, and there's a slide that will show this as a clear example of the key elements.

How to Lament – Psalm 13

- ADDRESS – directing the prayer to God
- COMPLAINT – a description of the problem
- REQUEST – ask for a specific response from God
- MOTIVATION – why should God help?
- CONFIDENCE – confession of trust in God's help

*How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul, and
have sorrow in my heart all day long? How
long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes or I will sleep the sleep of
death, and my enemy will say "I have
prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am
shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my
heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt
bountifully with me.*

I think this is a useful song to use in this context, partly because it's short, and the separate elements in it are neatly separated out, and in the Psalm 42 which we read together earlier, they're a bit blurred together. But this psalm really sets them out quite nicely as a kind of exemplar (and also if I'm honest because CMS had done a lot of the work for me). So, there are five sort of elements to this:

- **Address**, meaning bringing the prayer to God;
- **Complaint** or perhaps expression of regret: a description of the problem;
- and then a **request** asking God for His specific response;
- then a **motivation**: why should God help?
- And then finally, an expression of **confidence**.

So, just to take those a little bit more slowly,

- **Address**: coming before God with the prayer, *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?* But again, putting God at the start,
- Then a **Complaint** or perhaps an expression of regret, describing the problem to God. *How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

- **[Request]** And then what do we want God to do, and genuinely asking for God's intervention: *Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!*
- And then the **motivation**, why should God help? *Give light to my eyes or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*
- And then finally **[confidence]**, expressing our trust in God's help, *I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me.*

So you see, the pattern begins and ends with God in His rightful place. Again, if you've still got it open, look again at Psalm 42 which was read earlier: it starts with:

- 1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

And then it ends:

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

So, the complaint or cry for help is expressed in the context of recognising God's grace and salvation, God's authority. It is founded on a relationship with God.

Another resource I found really helpful, preparing for this morning, was a Franciscan website. And I can give you the web link, as I will later. And to quote from that website it says,

Lament is not a failure of faith, but an act of faith. We cry out directly to God because deep down we know that our relationship with God counts; it counts to us and it counts to God.

Even if we do not experience the closeness, we believe that God does care. Even if God seems not to hear, we believe that God is always within shouting distance. In the Scriptures, God does not say, "Do not fear, I will take away all the pain and struggle." Rather, we hear, "You have no need to fear, since I am with you" and together we will make it. (For example think of Isaac, frightened of the Philistine king [Genesis 26:24]; to the anxious Moses being sent to speak to Pharaoh [Exodus 3:11-12]; and the disciples when they see Jesus walking on the sea [Matthew 14:27])

And as our Psalm again this morning said,

- 7 Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls.

This is about calling out to God in the midst of that struggle.

So, what kind of complaints, what kind sorrows, can we bring to God? We see all sorts of examples in the Psalms, and I'm sure there are some with which we can all identify¹.

- So, in Psalm 6, we see sickness – "...heal me, O Lord, for my body is in terror"
[Psalm 6:3]

1 Bible quotations from
http://www.hopeparishchurch.org/uploads/1/0/8/4/108498889/pams_notes_on_psalms_of_lament_-_surviving_exile.pdf

- In Psalm 38, loneliness and alienation – “My friends and my companions stand back because of my affliction...” [Psalm 38:12]
- In Psalm 7, danger and mistreatment by others – “O Lord,... save me from all my pursuers” [Psalm 7:2]
- From today's Psalm, 42, separation from the worshipping community (that's something we're all feeling at the moment) “These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God...” [Psalm 42:4]
- Ageing, Psalm 71 – “Cast me not off in my old age...” [Psalm 71:9]
- And of course the ultimate affliction is physical death, Psalm 88 – “For my soul is surfeited with troubles and my life draws near to the nether world” [Psalm 88:4]

And of course there are many examples in the Psalms of coming before God in sorrow for our sin: anything and everything that arises from the broken nature of our World and impinges on our lives, we can bring to God in this way.

We might also be called to lament for the World, the World as a whole, or for our part of the World, as it's turned its back on God, We might weep over Kenilworth or our country. I mentioned the book of Lamentation: this is a mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem. It starts at the very beginning of Lamentations,

How deserted lies the city,
once so full of people!
How like a widow is she,
who once was great among the nations!
She who was queen among the provinces
has now become a slave.

But again, the book ends on a note of hope and trust in God, and the last sentence is really about ultimately accepting God's sovereignty: at the end of Lamentations 5 we read

21 Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return;
renew our days as of old
22 unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure.

So, Lament does not end with us – but with God. Repeating the end of our reading again, verse 11 from Psalm 42:

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

But that is not the end: to put our hope in God, and truly praise Him needs our response – HOPE is born out of our sorrow.

I was thinking about what the Queen might be going through at the moment, and I was reminded of the book that was done for her, celebrating her 90th Birthday. And I thought I would just read a little bit to you from the foreword that she wrote to that book. She wrote,

I have been – and remain – very grateful to you for your prayers and to God for his steadfast love. I have indeed seen his faithfulness. As I embark on my 91st year, I invite you to join me in reflecting on the words of a



poem quoted by my father, King George VI on his Christmas Day broadcast in 1939, the year that this country went to war for the second time in a quarter of a century.

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied,
"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

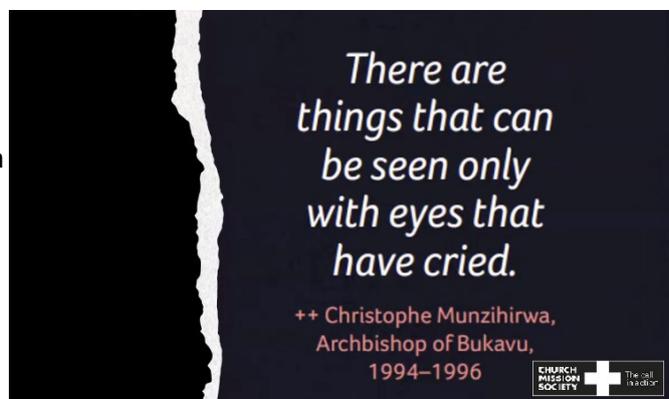
So, as we move out of COVID restrictions, let's just consider what we might be called to by God and put our hand in His.

We might come out of last year's experience seeing things in a different way, or even seeing things we've not seen before. The next slide is a quote from the CMS materials from a former archbishop of Bukavu who said,

There are things that can be seen only
with eyes that have cried.

Perhaps as we come out of this period we will see things that we've not seen before. Perhaps we will be given a fresh sight for the world around us.

But the next slide has a couple of pictures of Maggy Barankitse, and I'd like to share her story again taken from the materials from CMS. I hope you'll indulge me as I read this to you. I think it's a really good example of Hope coming from lament.



Maggy is a Tutsi. She was caught up in the ethnic massacres in Burundi in 1993. In October 1993, during an attack, she hid in the local bishop's residence while soldiers massacred 72 people, including one of her best friends. Amazingly, her seven children all survived the massacre by hiding in



the church. Emmanuel Katongole narrates her story: After the massacre, Maggy crawled into the chapel. She prayed as she cried, "My mother taught me you are a God of love. She lied to me. You are not love... God, why was I not killed? Why am I here? Why O God?" As she prayed and cried, she heard Chloe {one of her children}. The children had escaped by hiding. Bribing the militia with money, she managed to save another twenty-five children from the burning... Maggy eventually set up Maison Shalom – houses for children, farms, businesses, a swimming pool, a cinema, a hospital, a nursing home {she's clearly a remarkable woman!}, a micro-credit finance union and a university. From a cry of lament came a restlessness and a refusal to give in to life-destroying forces around her. She survived, confronted her pain and ultimately resisted despair. And became an activist.

After the massacre she experienced incredible energy, determination and anger – all of which she turned into setting up Maison Shalom. But the key driver for her was love. In her words, “Love made me an inventor.” In the face of trauma, she improvised and innovated so the children could not only survive but flourish. She created a new community – not solely Tutsi or Hutu, but a community beyond tribalism. Her love was deepened through grief and lament. Maggy did what she could with the resources she had. Perhaps we all need to follow her example and passionately resist the idea that we don’t have enough, know enough, aren’t good enough, or have been through too much to create change. Maggy operates from an excess of love. Love that knows what it is to suffer. Out of pain and anger, Maggy found the courage to take risks. She was determined that death and evil would not have the last word.

Sadly, that's not quite the end of the story.

In Burundi in 2015 President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a third term. This plunged the country into crisis; thousands fled, hundreds were arrested, and many were killed. Maggy had spoken out strongly against the third term, was targeted and fled into exile where she still is, living and working in Rwanda. The government has shut down all the Maison Shalom programmes. They have also killed some of the children. These events have of course deepened Maggy’s lament. But still, she keeps working.

This is not a "they lived happily-ever-after" story, yet, somehow, this makes Maggy’s story more poignant.

I wonder, can we aim to be like her and do what we can with the resources, knowledge and energy we have? What we can learn from Maggy is that lament will lead to love if we let it. In fact, I think we should be careful not to skip over the lament because it can lead to deeper love and generous service.

This chimes very much actually with our own Bishop John’s Easter message. As he was thinking about just coming out of the pandemic, Bishop John wrote:

We have seen suffering and we have seen compassion and love. Whoever we are, the pandemic will surely have had its impact on each one of us, shaking up what we thought we could take for granted. With so many deaths and bereavements and our own vulnerabilities to the virus, we have probably also thought more about death and our own mortality.

When we do this we see, perhaps for the first time, the preciousness of life itself and the value of every human life. We begin to weigh up and see what actually matters most in life. For most of us, the answer to that question is *love*. The Bible teaches that where love is God is because God is love.

So, lament is a valid and biblical response to our negative experiences. If we really are authentic, then lament can only come from a trusting relationship in God, and it should lead to a response of love, and action (although I have to say personally am not sure what action God is calling me to at the moment!).

We need to allow ourselves, and others, time to deal with our emotional response to the last year or so, and to bring that to God and not just "soldier on" or return to normal as if nothing has changed.

What about you?

Action:

- Give yourself Permission to lament – for as long as you need

- Allow others their time of lamenting – for as long as they need
- And let's be prepared to cry out to God together as we meet again.

In one of my Zoom meetings earlier this week, someone commented that they were really struggling to pray on Zoom. And that was such an encouragement to me because I thought, "Oh, it's not just me."

Maybe we haven't all had the same experience, and maybe not all of our shared experiences when we come back together will be joyful.

- But be ready for HOPE and ACTION to come out of lament – what is God calling you to? What is God calling us to, as we draw closer to Him in honesty?

The final slide just has the links to a couple of the resources if you want to explore this further. The CMS materials and Franciscan website, and of course the Psalms are a hugely valuable resource for this. So I would encourage you to spend some time with this if you think it would be helpful.

To explore further:

www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/biblical-laments-prayer-out-of-pain
<https://churchmissionsociety.org/our-stories/lament-for-lent/>

I'm just going to finish with a prayer.

God of love, there are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried. Give us, we pray, courage to give ourselves to lamentation. Draw us deep into silence, mouths to the dust of the world's suffering. Then release us into praise, your compassion seen, our hope renewed. So, bring your healing now. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen

Prayerful Reflection

[Karen Mills:]

Thank you so much, Kim. Such an amount of material there that we're just going to pause for a minute just to allow God to just settle on the things that He wants to say to you, in your heart. Just a moment's silence.

[pause]

I pray for each person listening today, that You would give them the freedom to lament. As British people, we tend to be a bit 'stiff upper lip'. But Father, help us to get lost in You, and to be really honest with You about how we have been feeling and how we are feeling about our fears and our hopes for the future. And Father, for each one of us, the experience of the last year of walking through pandemic will have been entirely different. But Father God, thank You that You are walking with us, that You have walked with us. And even though we might be fearful of what is next, we thank You that You have us in Your hand, even though we may have not walked this way before, You are walking in front of us.

Father, we just begin to think about all that Kim has said and the really helpful things that he suggested that we can do to just put this into some sort of context. Would You be with each and every one of us. Father, thank You for the safety of the relationship with You.

Father, thank You, thank You, that You give us permission to weep. But You also give us permission to hope.

So as we come to the end of this morning, plenty to think about, and probably some good things to talk with each other about. I'll just read from Philippians², and in a way as a blessing to you.

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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