The Biblical Tradition of Lament in a Culture of Denial Concerning Death

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INTRODUCTION

This article had its origin in a particular context which I will briefly explain. Over the past few years I have become increasingly aware of the role played in the mission of the people of God by medical professionals of many types, including men and women called to work in palliative care, either as specialist doctors or nurses, or in the capacity of hospital or hospice chaplaincy. I had published a book with the title *Stumbling Toward Zion* in which I related my own struggle to cope with the terminal illness of my wife, and the manner in which the biblical theme of lament took on a profound personal significance for me, both in confronting the imminent death of a loved one, and in coping with her loss. The book attracted the attention of people facing similar experiences, and it also caught the notice of professionals who care for the dying and for families wrestling with loss, often in tragic circumstances.

As the result of this publication I was asked to address an online conference of the Scottish Association of Palliative Care Chaplains with a request that I relate the theme of the book to their highly specialised and demanding work. I should add that my wife had died in a hospice, so I had deeply personal reasons to be grateful for such institutions and, more generally, for the emergence of palliative care as a discipline. The more I have been exposed to the work of professionals in this area, the greater has become my admiration for them, together with a growing realisation that this is a crucial area of Christian presence in a secular culture. At the same time I increasingly realised that such work may exact a considerable personal cost at the spiritual, emotional and psychological levels, and that the need of pastoral care for the carers is not always recognised by local congregations.

I commenced the presentation to the chaplains with a number of personal references which I repeat here. I obviously had no direct experience of the practice of professional palliative care. However, I have been a pastor, and Christian ministry involves frequent encounters with death, dying and mourning so that it may justifiably be described as itself a form of palliative care. Indeed, much of what I attempted to share with the chaplains would relate equally to ministers who face similar pressures. I

described to my audience the desolating experience, while in my mid-20s, of being called to a remote farmhouse where I discovered a key member of my leadership team slumped in his armchair after a fatal heart attack, while his wheelchair-bound wife sat inconsolable beside him! Nothing — including three years of theological education — had prepared me for such a traumatic experience.

Subsequently, I had responded to a call to serve in mission and found myself in a context in which I now encountered entirely new approaches to death, mourning, and the relationship of the living to the dead! Traditional ways of dealing with death in the tropical rain forest of Nigeria were so different from the funerals I had conducted in Cambridge that they might have been happening on another planet. It became very clear to me that, even among Christians, ways of dealing with death are shaped by culture as much as — if not more than — Scripture, and the approach to death in the secular West is radically different from the patterns within traditional societies — and that the former might have much to learn from the latter.

A final reference to personal experience: I recalled an occasion when I had accompanied a group of students on an 'Urban Experience' residential week in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It included a day shadowing a hospital chaplain and one conversation with him has remained with me. After recounting the challenge of listening to parents lamenting the loss of a child, he expressed his frustration that fellow-clerics in parish work frequently asked him 'When will you return to *real* ministry?' I subsequently wrote to the man to express my conviction that he was on the frontline of mission in a secular culture and that his work constituted a genuinely missionary engagement where it matters most.

THE CULTURE OF DENIAL

The broad cultural context within which palliative care is administered today is one in which the reality of death is generally supressed, evaded or denied. In the last century, Ernest Becker wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book in which he argued that 'of all the things that move people, one of the principal ones is the terror of death.' Becker recognised that all historical religions had addressed themselves to the problem of 'how to bear the end of life', but with the loss of faith the terror of death became unbearable and resulted in the creation of multiple strategies of evasion, forgetfulness and suppression. In a memorable sentence Becker concluded that modern

man 'is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.'[1]

Of course, people steeped in the knowledge of the Bible should have no need of contemporary scholarship to inform them of this fact since its teaching so clearly provides understanding of the *origin* of death, of its terrible reality, by which human beings are 'all their lives […] held in slavery by *their fear of death*' (Heb. 2:15) — and of the One whose own death and resurrection removes the 'sting' of human mortality. Nonetheless, Becker's work remains important since it explores the cultural consequences of the loss of such a faith, of the absence of God at a point in European history at which the support once provided by belief was being eroded to vanishing point. Attending secular funerals must be among the most heartrending of experiences for believers today, not because secular celebrants lack sympathy and sensitivity (they do not), but because no word of *hope* is possible and the focus is determinedly fixed on the past, on memory, with not a glimmer of light from the future.[2]

Becker's book was published half-a-century ago and in the intervening period all the trends he identified have accelerated, leaving us in a cultural wilderness in which a multi-billion-pound entertainment industry has grown to gargantuan proportions to assist our forgetfulness, and the cult of youth, beauty, and sex has expanded to an industrial scale to further facilitate the flight from reality.[3] The inability to confront death is reflected in multiple ways in contemporary society, many of which may almost pass unnoticed. 'Abide with me' may still be sung by a soloist at the FA Cup Final at Wembley Stadium, but the crowd no longer

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1 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p. 284.

2 It should be added that the distinctively 'modern' aversion to death results not only from the decline of religious faith, but also from the emergence of modernity itself. Zygmunt Bauman describes how modern people came 'to see as "progress", the relentless "emancipation" of man from "constraints". We have learnt (and have been taught) to view the primal human bonds […] as oppression [….] But the liberated have been ushered into new, no less awesome slavery. Life now had little else to define itself by as the movement toward death. With everything that fills it with contents reduced to ephemerality […] it turns into a long dress rehearsal for non-being.' *Mortality and Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 49.

3 Neil Postman lamented the condition of American culture toward the end of the last century as follows: 'Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice.' *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 4.

join in because the words are unknown, and it is unlikely in any case that they would want to admit that 'the darkness deepens'! When such crowds do acknowledge the death of a local football idol, it is no longer with a moment's silence, but with one filled with the sound of clapping! Applause draws attention to the individual's *past*, and removes the possibility that silence might compel us to reflect upon death, the idol's and our own. Becker wrote not as a theologian, but as a psychologist, but he recognised that if 'you don't have a God in heaven, an invisible dimension that justifies the visible one, then you 'take what is nearest to hand and work out your problem on that.'[4]

What shall we say about the 'way of death' in contemporary funerary practices? I am not referring to the secular funerals already mentioned, but to Christian approaches to death and mourning. The cultural pressures we have briefly described are immensely powerful, and in this as well as in other areas of life they may subtly infiltrate Christian emotions, thought and practice. Why has the funeral been replaced in some Christian traditions by the 'Service of Thanksgiving', with the body of the deceased long since disposed of by a grieving extended family alone at the graveside?[5] Is this not a form of evasion, a religious version of the clapping football crowd, unwilling to face the reality of death and burial? I mentioned above the contrast between what was once called 'The American Way of Death' and the communal outpouring of lament which I witnessed in the rainforests of Africa, where death was not seen as an end, but as a point of transition demanding ritual recognition by an entire village. I confess that when attending a neighbour's funeral recently in the Catholic church where he had worshipped all his life, I felt moved by the richness of the ritual, both its language and its actions, including the sprinkling of the coffin of the deceased, 'as a remembrance of his baptism'.

THE BIBLICAL TRADITION OF LAMENT

One might imagine that the biblical practice of lament would become a key resource in the historical and cultural context we have briefly described, but the reality is otherwise. This form of prayer, whether used in private devotions or as sung public worship, continues to be used in liturgical and sacramental traditions, but has become marginal in much of contemporary, Western Christianity, and is often completely absent. We shall have to ask how this situation has come about, but first we must affirm that the

4 Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 162.

5 I should make it clear that I am not denying the importance of thanksgiving for a well-lived Christian life; it is the substitution of thanksgiving for mourning that I object to.

prayer of lament is so fundamental to the very structure of spiritual life and worship within the Bible that its neglect and absence would suggest a serious departure from the biblical faith. I returned from Africa with a host of urgent questions arising from the encounter with both the *primal* world of a traditional people, and (by contrast) the heart-rending experience of the slums of Lagos. The discovery of Robert Davidson's book *The Courage to Doubt* came as a providential gift from heaven! The following passage was balm to my troubled spirit:

> Such [lament] psalms found a lasting place in the hymn book of ancient Israel and were continuingly used and useful because both the community and individuals within the community found across the centuries that serious threats to the integrity of their religious experience had to be faced. In every age faith involved a struggle, a struggle to understand the ways of God whose presence was celebrated in worship, but who often seemed strangely absent. *"Why?" and "How long?" were repeatedly discovered to be as authentic cries as "Hallelujah".*[6]

At a later stage I read and re-read Claus Westermann's *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, originally published in Germany in 1961 when the memories of the immediate past remained raw and profoundly troubling. Westermann wrote that the upheavals of the previous decades had resulted in a new appreciation of 'why the elementary polarity of praise and lament is the decisive one in the Psalms of the ancient people of God.' He testified that during the horrors of the war 'the *praise* of God was rediscovered', but now, facing new catastrophes, the lament 'again appeared in its positive and necessary function.'[7] Westermann discovered the origins of the lament tradition at the beginning of the history of Israel when the slaves in Egypt 'cried to the Lord', who was moved by their suffering and acted within history for their deliverance. He concluded that whenever

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[6] Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring and Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 12. Italics added.

[7] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 12. I would add a third key resource on this subject in the shape of Walter Brueggemann's little study: *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). He classifies Psalms of *Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation* and comments that a church that engages in 'a frightened numb denial and deception and does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life' is adopting an odd inclination for Bible users, 'given the large numbers of psalms that are songs of lament, protest, and complaint about the incoherence that is experienced in the world. At least it is clear that a church that goes on singing "happy songs" in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible does.' [p. 26]

a theology of the Old Testament stresses the crucial significance of the deliverance from Egypt, 'it does so because Israel experienced God's presence throughout its history as one who saves'. This conferred upon the cry of distress the status of a defining characteristic of Israel's spirituality. Perhaps Westermann's most significant conclusion was that the polarity between praise and lament is a fundamental aspect of a genuine relationship between God and human beings: 'Just as joy and sorrow in alternation are part of the finitude of human existence […] so praise and lamentation are part of man's relationship to God. *Hence, something must be amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation.*'[8]

It is not possible here to engage in detailed exegesis of particular texts, but I want to notice two examples from the Hebrew Bible which seem especially relevant to this discussion. Psalm 88 is not only a classic example of an individual cry of lament, it is also unique in that it is the only time that such a cry of distress does not result in 'reorientation' and renewed praise. In other words, the *polarity* we have just noticed above is absent here and the prayer ends with the bleak statement: 'You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.' (88:18).

Some commentators have attempted to soften this language, unable it seems to admit that a poem such as this addressed to God could go unanswered. By contrast, Aileen Barclay, who spent years supporting a beloved husband afflicted with a degenerative disease, testifies to the profound importance of this psalm, 'as an outpouring of deep and apparently unresolved lament'. She insists that it has 'cathartic potential for those who suffer the living bereavement of Alzheimers disease'[9] and comments that carers and those they care for have frequently needed to learn 'to live as excluded people, not only in personal encounters but also within the communities around them'. Thus, Psalm 88 — *including its bleak ending*

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8 Ibid., p. 267. Italics added.

9 Aileen Barclay, 'Psalm 88: Living with Alzheimers', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 16 (2012), 88-101, (p. 88). Carleen Mandolfo reads Psalm 88 in relation to the Holocaust and argues that the absence of a divine response is a positive thing in the light of such a catastrophe: 'Perhaps even God recognizes the enormity of what has happened, and chooses not to answer so as not to belittle the suffering of the victims.' 'Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response', *Biblical Interpretation*, 15 (2007), (151-70) <https://www.academia.edu/769971/Psalm_88_and_the_Holocaust_Lament_in_Search_of_a_Divine_Response> [accessed 11 September 2023] (p. 19)

— must be seen as 'a gift to the church, especially to those who suffer the rigors of chronic illness'.[10]

The second example concerns the anguished prayers of the prophet Jeremiah, often identified as 'Jeremiah's Confessions'. Here we have individual laments of extraordinary boldness and honesty, but in this case we also possess detailed knowledge of the context of the person uttering these remarkable prayers.[11] Not without reason has Jeremiah been described as the weeping prophet, his tears flowing profusely for a combination of reasons: the failure of the young Josiah's reformation; the resistance, animosity and violence which the prophet's preaching aroused; the depths of hypocrisy resulting from what has been called the Royal-Temple ideology; and the coming catastrophe which would sweep away everything familiar and beloved. Kathleen O'Connor has written a remarkable study of this book in which she draws upon trauma and disaster studies to gain insight into the ways in which 'overwhelming violence and debilitating losses afflict minds, bodies and spirits.' O'Connor found that trauma studies shed fresh light on some of the most difficult and disturbing texts in this book, and that the language with which the prophet challenged God, actually accusing him of deceit, and cursing the day of his own birth, suggests that he himself was suffering deep and lasting trauma.

> Jeremiah's confessions are laments, that is, prayers of complaint to God similar to the laments in the book of Psalms. In them, his relationship with God balances on the breaking point. But ultimately, his prayers — in all their bitterness and anguish — keep that relationship alive and teach readers how to move through the frightening spiritual wreckage left by disaster.[12]

It was once assumed that the book of Lamentations was authored by Jeremiah, but although there is no evidence to justify that assumption, it is not at all difficult to imagine that the broken person who composed the 'Confessions' could have expressed the even deeper level of grief and desolation of Lamentations following the destruction of Jerusalem. Here the darkness closes in to an extent that exactly matches the final complaint of Psalm 88, so that once again the *polarity* between lament and praise is ruptured when the author of this distinctively *urban* lament bemoans the absence of comfort:

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10 Barclay, 'Psalm 88', p. 95.

11 The texts are Jeremiah 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13, 14-18.

12 Kathleen O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 81. O'Connor has also written a very helpful study of Lamentations: *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

This is why I weep
  and my eyes overflow with tears.
No-one is near to comfort me,
  no-one to restore my spirit.
My children are destitute
  because the enemy has prevailed. (1:16)

It is true of course that at 3:19ff. the clouds suddenly lift and — miraculously — hope is renewed and faith discovers reasons to affirm the 'great love and compassion of the LORD'. But these verses have been horribly misused, wrenched from their context and employed as the basis for the kind of untroubled celebration which ignores both the tenor of the book as a whole, and the fact that the relief is temporary! There is in this testimony a lurching between sudden hope and renewed despair that is completely true to human psychological experience; the person suffering what would now be diagnosed as PTSD does not instantly overcome the trauma which is expressed in the following confession (a confession which comes *after* the sun had broken through):

My eyes will flow unceasingly,
  without relief,
Until the LORD looks down
  from heaven and sees.
What I see brings grief to my soul
  because of all the women of my city. (3:49-51)

What is striking in this statement is the contrast between what the poet sees, the scenes of horrific violence which he/she obviously cannot forget, and we may surely conclude that we are dealing with flashbacks and nightmares here, and by contrast, the implied complaint that God appears *not to have seen those same events which triggered such trauma*. The person uttering this prayer is still awaiting God's gaze to be focussed upon the tragedy which has devastated his/her life! A statement like this makes the question of theodicy — the relationship between God and intense human suffering — unavoidable, and I suggest that it demands that we reflect critically upon certain ways of speaking about divine sovereignty, since the use of the doctrine of God's omnipotence to require unquestioning submission on the part of sufferers is a pastoral move that ignores the tradition of lament.

It is difficult at this point not to think of the impact of the events of the twentieth century on theology and its language concerning God. A leading historian of the period estimates that thirty-six and a half million Europeans died between 1939 and 1945 from war-related causes (equal to

the total population of France at the outbreak of the conflict). The reference to the plight of women in Lamentations refers to a tragedy which has been replicated and multiplied many times, but never before did it reach such monstrous proportions as in Europe in the closing years of Second World War. Clinics in Vienna reported 87,000 women had been raped by Soviet soldiers in three weeks following the Red Army's arrival in the city, while in Berlin 53,000 lost children were wandering amid the endless ruins of the city, and in Rome the Quirinale Gardens became a gathering place for thousands of mutilated, disfigured and unclaimed children.[13] Even without the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust, we are compelled, like the author of Lamentations, to ask how we are to speak about God in a world which has known such demonic levels of violence and destruction.

There is no easy answer to such questions, but we may take notice of the connection between the trauma of Lamentations and the Book of Comfort in Isaiah 40ff. The opening words of this chapter are of *comfort*, and the instruction to 'speak tenderly to Jerusalem' must be a response to the repeated complaint that it was precisely this kind of healing and reassurance that appeared to have been absent. Indeed, later in this chapter there is evidence that the survivors of the catastrophe had settled into a *culture of lament* (40:27-28) in which they were bereft of the language of testimony and so had nothing to say to the nations (40:6). In other words, the trauma of the ending of their known world had created a crisis for theology and mission and in precisely this context the great prophet of the exile was summoned to offer a fresh vision of the tenderness and kindness of God. This was accompanied by a prophetic word capable of inspiring the *hope* that a new exodus was yet to come on a previously unimagined scale, bringing the long-promised *shalom* of Yahweh which would transform both Israel and the nations. Westermann comments that the laments referred to in Isaiah 40:27 were not those of individuals, but were liturgical, a form of 'words used by the community in its worship'. The result, he suggests, was that the dominance of the lament psalms in the exile resulted in 'a fixed mood always looking backwards, with no expectation of fresh action on the part of God',[14] the *polarity* between lament and praise had been lost as grief destroyed hope, suffering seemed to darken the face of God, and the very idea of celebration amounted to a denial of reality.

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[13] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), pp. 16-21.

[14] Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 18.

If the experience of biblical Israel in the loss of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon can be seen as analogous to the collapse of Christendom and the horrors of the twentieth century, might we identify a parallel between the reappearance of hope and the discovery of a new theological vision for the future of the world in Isaiah 40-66, and our context today? If the Psalms and the book of Lamentations warn against the expectation that the trauma resulting from catastrophe can be easily and swiftly overcome (and they certainly do), does not the fresh light streaming from the promise of God's new future in the Book of Comfort remind us that the messianic character of the message of the Bible means that the last word is one of hope, not despair, so that the polarity between lament and praise remains the gift of grace, both for suffering individuals and for the broken world.[15]

THE COSTLY LOSS OF LAMENT[16]

If we accept the conclusion that the 'cry out of the depths' is 'an inevitable part of what happens between God and man', then the question has to be

[15] I am struck, for example, by the number of German theologians who emerged from the European crisis of the 1940s, devastated by their horrendous experience of Nazism and the horrors of the war, yet discovering a theology of hope for the future. The obvious example is Jurgen Moltmann who wrote in 2019: 'I remember the experiences of the war with continuing horror. My generation was destined for a murderous war in which it was no longer a matter of victory or peace, but only of death. […] The survivors experienced the end of terror in 1945, but we had become so used to death that life took on a "take it or leave it" atmosphere because it had become meaningless.' *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), p. 4. Johann Baptist Metz, taken out of school at the age of 16 and sent to the front line of World War Two, was then told to go back to HQ with a message from his commander. He returned to discover his unit — made up of fellow teenage schoolboys — had been obliterated. He wrote: 'Now I could see only dead and empty faces where the day before I had shared childhood fears and laughter. I remember nothing but a wordless cry.' See *Remembering and Resisting: The New Political Theology*, ed. by John K. Downey (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2022), p. 81. Like Moltmann, Metz emerged from the horrors of the twentieth century to summon his Catholic tradition to a new sense of mission in a broken world, especially in his challenging book *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[16] This subtitle is borrowed from Walter Brueggemann: 'The Costly Loss of Lament' in *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*, ed. by Patrick Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 98-111.

asked as to why lament has ceased to be a component of spirituality and worship in much of the modern, Western church. The answer is complex and involves too many factors to make a full response here. As already suggested, the powerful influence of the modern culture of the denial of death is a significant factor. Believers who have been socialised amidst the wealth and materialism of the contemporary Western world are almost inevitably influenced by the values which dominate their society. Indeed, there is clear evidence that this was the case toward the end of the New Testament period itself, where the church at Laodicea boasted, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing'. There is simply no place for lament in such a community since the congregational consensus is that life is wonderful and trouble-free, and no space remains for doubt or questioning. Consequently there is little sympathy for people who struggle, since they must remain silent and keep their doubts to themselves so as not to disturb the dominant view that all is well. However, the desperately hollow nature of the celebrations of such a community is revealed by the fact that its untroubled optimism rendered this church not only *blind* (Rev. 3:17), but also *deaf* to the sound of the excluded Jesus who was knocking on the door and seeking entrance (3:20). There are sobering issues here for churches that have forgotten how to lament.

Perhaps the crucial question, given that lament plays such a central role in biblical spirituality, concerns the manner in which Scripture as a whole is being read and interpreted by those responsible for leadership and the conduct of public worship. In the light of the discussion above, must we not conclude that the view that 'endless praise' is the norm for worship *in a broken world* reflects both a wilful ignorance concerning that world, and an absence of serious reflection on the theology of worship in the Bible?[17] Underlying this neglect of the biblical tradition of praise and lament we may discover assumptions concerning the relationship between the two testaments which involve a kind of *supercessionism* by which the polarity between lament and praise, anguish and joy, is assumed to have been transcended by the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the incarnation of the Son of God is the turning point of the ages, and the worship of the crucified and risen Jesus is at the very core of the new songs which are sung both by the church on earth and by the heavenly choirs. But in the present age, this confidence and joy continues to exist in polarity with questions

[17] This is not a reactionary statement in defence of unchanged adherence to tradition! There are talented and deeply sensitive contemporary song-writers whose work is a blessing to modern Christianity. My plea is rather for a recovery of the *polarity* between praise and lament described above.

and doubts which, if anything, may become more urgent and anguished precisely on account of the enlarged nature of what has been promised by the Gospel.

At the conclusion of his work on praise and lament in the psalms, Westermann discusses the loss of this polarity in contemporary Christianity and concludes that in the theology and worship of the modern Western churches, 'suffering as opposed to sin has receded far into the background.' He describes much of Western preaching as follows:

> Jesus Christ's work of salvation has to do with the forgiveness of sins and with eternal life; it does not, however, deal with ending human suffering. Here we see the real reason why the lament has been dropped from Christian prayer.[18]

Westermann goes on to observe that the gospels relate the story of Christ's passion in the language of Psalm 22, which suggests that they intended to say that Jesus 'had taken up the lament of those people who suffer, that he too entered into suffering.' Consequently, his suffering belongs within the history of those who suffer, so that in his pain and death, *'Jesus could not have had only the sinner in mind; he must also have been thinking of those who suffer.'*[19]

It is not possible here to go into greater depth concerning Christian suffering and the position accorded to it within the New Testament. However, we may notice not only the infinite compassion of Christ for the crowds of despairing people who followed him throughout Galilee, and the testimony of the apostolic writers — including the apostle Paul, who is completely open concerning his personal anguish and pain, and in Romans 9-11 wrestles with the mystery of God's will and the tragedy of Israel — nor even the fact that John of Patmos informs us that the saints in heaven continue to cry out in the language of the lament psalms, asking God, 'How Long?' (Rev. 6:10). Most crucially of all, the Easter story itself includes the Sabbath between crucifixion and resurrection, a day which has been described as 'the day when God died.' And here I am bound to mention the important work of Alan Lewis whose 'theology of Holy Saturday' provides a vital and original contribution to our subject by reminding us of the spiritual and theological importance of that empty, hopeless, even godless day at the very heart of the gospel narrative:

> [T]he tradition which Paul received, and then passed on to the Corinthians, was that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, *that he was buried*, and that he was raised on the third day (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Here resurrec-

[18] Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, p. 274.

[19] Ibid., p. 275. Italics added.

> tion is not permitted to verge upon the cross, instantaneously converting its death into new life, still less to trespass death's own borders and thus to *identify* the cross with glory. Instead, death is given time and space to be itself, in all its coldness and helplessness. Again it is especially typical of the Reformed Confessions that for the Westminster Shorter Catechism the humiliation of Christ, begun in birth under the law, and leading to the cursed death of the cross, consists finally in his "being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time."[20]

The cost of the loss of lament extends beyond the spirituality and worship of the church since it impacts both the *mission* of the people of God in the broken world we have described, and reaches into the *social and political spheres* in ways that are rarely recognised but are of fundamental importance. With regard to mission, the credibility of a Christianity which knows only praise and celebration is inevitably undermined among people who have suffered grievous abuse and pain, since it suggests an inability or unwillingness to understand the reality of human brokenness and despair. I have never forgotten the words of a brilliant research scientist whom I visited, concerned about her long absence from Sunday worship. I knew that she had known great personal suffering and was tempted to suicide, but in response to my gentle enquiry she confessed: 'I cannot go there any longer because no one in that congregation has any problems.' She knew, as I did, that this was not the case, but the complaint, or rather the heartfelt lament, was that there was no point at which the worship of the congregation made connections to a broken and bleeding soul, so that such one-sided celebration not only failed to meet her need, but deepened a serious and threatening personal crisis.

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[20] Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 37. Lewis's concern is that the Cross not be viewed as 'glorious' apart from the depths of suffering and humiliation it involved, depths which were plumbed on Good Friday and experienced by the disciples on Easter Saturday. It is God's entry into such horror that constitutes the glory of Calvary.

This extraordinary book should be required reading for anyone concerned about the subject we are discussing. Lewis charts in great detail the parallels between 'the day God died' and the secular culture of the modern West. Here he is on topic that could not be more relevant in light of the recent movie *Oppenheimer*: '"You shall be as God" was the primordial serpent's menacing seduction; and on August 6, 1945 that sacrilegious Feast of Transfiguration, gods we became, wielding as never before the promethean sovereignty over life itself — only to see in the mirror of atomic light, "brighter than a thousand suns", our transformed faces not effulgent with God's glory but wearing the death masks of the devil.' [p. 277]

As to politics, a society which lauds success, happiness and endless growth will find dissenting voices to be at best a distraction, and at worst a political threat to the ideology of endless progress and universal well-being. Walter Brueggemann writes that lament involves the belief that God matters *in every dimension of life*.

> Where God's dangerous availability is lost because we fail to carry on our part of the difficult conversation, where God's vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair, and the world as we now have it becomes absolutized. Our understanding of faith is altered dramatically depending on whether God is a dead cipher who cannot be addressed and is only the silent *guarantor* of the status quo, or whether God can be addressed in risky ways as the *transformer* of what has not yet appeared.[21]

LAMENT AND PALLIATIVE CARE

We return, finally, to our starting point in the crucial importance of lament with regard to professionals in a variety of medical practices, including the care of people facing life-changing injuries or terminal illness. As this article was being typed I listened to a discussion of the crisis facing Britain's National Health Service in which it became very clear that a crucial contributing factor to this profoundly challenging situation is located in the tiredness and physical and emotional exhaustion suffered by many carers in the wake of the Covid pandemic. During this time staff in hospitals, care homes and hospices were confronted with unprecedented pressures, not least in the increase in death rates, a phenomenon now made visible in the moving memorial on the bank of the River Thames in London. In a culture which, as we have seen, finds death a subject to be avoided, the sudden impact of a dramatic increase in terminal conditions was bound to place huge physical and emotional pressures upon doctors and nurses, and left them vulnerable when the full extent of the staffing problems emerged subsequent to the pandemic. How might the tradition of lament discussed here relate to such a situation and, more importantly, to exhausted and distressed practitioners?

The obvious conclusion to be drawn in the first place is that the cries and groans of emotionally drained professionals can find a connection to the distress of the Jewish captives in Egypt which the privileged and educated Moses discovered only when he 'watched them at their hard labour' (Ex. 2:11). How much 'hard labour' goes unseen and therefore unrecog-

[21] Brueggemann, 'Costly Loss of Lament', p. 108.

nised? And where this happens, the lack of notice, the apparent invisibility of people who work under immense pressures, can only increase their sense of isolation and loneliness. There is, of course, a clear difference between these contexts, but the Exodus story nonetheless reveals a God who cares about human suffering, heard the groaning of an oppressed people, 'and was concerned about them.' (11:25) The author of Exodus tells us that the oppression of the Jewish people reminded Yahweh of his covenant with Abraham, and since the promise made to the Patriarch was to extend to 'all peoples on earth', we have warrant to bear testimony to traumatised colleagues that suffering and anguish need not be a cry in the dark, a scream which goes unheard in an empty cosmos, but can be directed to the God who listens, responds and saves. What is clear from the origin of lament in the Exodus narratives, is confirmed and made wondrously visible in the gospel story of Jesus, 'healing every disease and sickness', and moved with compassion for the crowds who were 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matt. 9:35-36).

However, if Christians in caring professions can recognise their unique opportunities to contribute to the *missio Dei* within the context of their work, it is imperative that they are equally conscious of their own vulnerability and need for support, counsel and prayer. I have observed that individuals drawn to caring professions are often people who feel a deep, Christ-like compassion for the most marginalised and neglected people on the fringes of capitalist society. This is true not only of those who comfort the dying, but also of professionals in education and social care, where the needs of vulnerable children and young people are immense and can result in heart-breaking and trauma-inducing experiences. The physical and emotional demands which such work makes upon individuals, not to mention the demands on time when responding to crises may mean working far beyond the hours of nine-to-five, can threaten to overwhelm individuals, resulting in personal breakdown and creating serious problems in marriage and family life. The prayer of lament becomes in such situations a crucial spiritual resource for the Christian professional, and the divine response might turn out to be like that to the exhausted Elijah: *sleep*, 'Get up and *eat and drink*', and listen for the *gentle whisper* which will result in both fresh vision and a reordered life (1 Kings 19:3-9).

Finally, there are crucial lessons for churches, especially where the lament tradition has been ignored and abandoned. The individuals who have a vocation in the caring professions which we have discussed need to be recognised, listened to, and regularly supported in prayer and pastoral care. There needs to be radical change in the manner in which mission is understood so that the commitment to support and intercession which has long been normal for those who feel called to work overseas in what

were traditionally called 'mission fields', is now extended to the caring professions we have discussed above. Moreover, the nature of the prayerful support such people will need, will not simply focus on evangelistic fruitfulness, but must be informed by the reality of the difficulties and struggles which are bound to be encountered by practitioners of care in a broken society. In other words, prayer for mission in these contexts will demand a recovery of the freedom to utter prayers of lament.

I close with a quotation from a book on the subject of this article which has been of great help to me. Scott Ellington's *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* explores this tradition and its marginalisation in so much of Western Christianity and he concludes that the fact that it is the 'nobodies' in society who recognize the Son of David in Matthew's Gospel serves 'to underscore an important shift in the twenty-first century church.'

> Though the prayer of lament remains a resource for all who experience a suffering that diminishes the fullness of life, the vocation of lament is first and foremost the province of the foreigner, the widow, the deformed, and the destitute. The practice of this vocation challenges the hegemony of the Western church. The loss of the practice of lament in materialistic, wealthy cultures has signaled a shift away from a Western, upper-middleclass, male control on the proclamation and interpretation of the gospel. Increasingly it is the "nobodies" of Western society and the long-silenced remainder of the world that challenges a Church that finds no place for lament.[22]

[22] Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008), p. 191.