

MAY 2021 TEACHING – LEAVING & CLEAVING/LAMENT:

2 MAY: SPACE & TIME TO LAMENT: BEV:

In planning as a nation to move on after several lockdowns because of Covid; and in leaving 286 as a church family at the end of this month, our home for the last 10 years, and all of us continuing on a relatively unknown journey, it seemed wise to take some space and time to reflect on how we feel about all these things before God. Many of you felt the same way and we received 3 emails in one week making the same point. Thank you for your thoughts, prayers and communications with the team – it has inspired us to set this month aside to pause, grieve and lament our losses before God, and to leave well what has gone before, in order to embrace well the new things God has for us. This does not mean a month will complete the need to grieve and lament, but hopefully it will give space and focus to begin the process.

Everyone has had to embrace some form of loss throughout 2020 and the beginning of 2021. Some have losses greater than others, losing loved ones, and not being able to be with them, being one of the most devastating I'm sure; but all our differing losses, practical, physical, emotional, relational and spiritual, and their impact on us, matter to God and benefit from processing with Him and others.

I'm so glad God hears and understands our heart cries. The Bible, especially the Psalms and Lamentations give us encouragement and permission to share our deepest felt emotions, without labelling us as faithless and weak. We have the example of Jesus in Gethsemane sharing His mental anguish and sorrow with His closest confidantes and pouring His breaking heart out to His heavenly Father before His arrest and crucifixion. God is not afraid of our emotions; He doesn't demand we suppress them; He invites us to bring them to Him. It's important we do process grief, disappointment anger and other darker emotions in this healthy way, otherwise they can emerge in unhealthy ways – in binding, ultimately destructive, coping mechanisms and behaviours, or other physical, emotional and spiritually damaging ways.

During lockdown some of us have been listening to the Bema podcasts which look at the scriptures through eastern eyes and with an eastern cultural perspective. It is mind-blowing how different eastern and western mindsets are, and there are greater depths to the scriptures to understand when we embrace both perspectives! Their podcast [episode 57] on the Book of Lamentations makes the following two main points:

1. Lamentations is a conversation between an observer/narrator and a woman [deserted, widowed, betrayed and distressed]. The woman laments before God and asks Him, asking who He's ever treated like this? Is it right to treat people this way? Mercifully, God will take this questioning from us without taking offence or rejecting us!
2. Lamentations is written as a poem with well-known patterns and repeats, familiar in eastern culture and writings. They are intended to draw us into the experience to find out more about God and the central point He wants us to discover within the passage. At the very centre of Lamentations, the exploration leads us to the word HOPE. There becomes a forward momentum from grief, with a new perspective forming as despair turns to hope and redemption.

I've also been recommended the Bema podcasts [episodes 26-29] on the Exodus through the wilderness, which we feel may well be relevant to our CL journey forward. I've included this in recommendations in the May teaching notes for individuals and CGs. [available from tomorrow]

Many helpful resources to aid us in reflecting on our losses, grief and lament have come through Lectio 365 and the Prayer Course 2 on unanswered prayer [24/7 resources].

On Easter Sunday Lectio 365 noted the Qs Jesus asked within the events of Easter week: When Mary encountered Jesus in the Garden, mistaking Him for the gardener, having found the tomb empty and thinking His body was stolen, Jesus asked a distressed Mary the Q: Why are you crying? [John 20:13]. Inviting her to share her pain.

To the 2 on the Emmaus Rd: the risen Jesus [not recognised by them] asks the Q. What are you discussing...Don't you understand? [Luke 24:17-25]. He invites them to share, and speaks into, their confusion.

To His disciples Jesus asks Q. Why are you troubled and why do doubts rise in your minds? [Luke 24:38]: He invites them to share the crisis of faith they are having.

And to the guilt-ridden Peter who had denied and betrayed Him, Jesus asks [3 times, once for each denial] Q. Do you truly love Me? [John 21:15]. This invitation was perhaps the most profound because it enabled Peter to rid himself of guilt and shame at his betrayal, and to be able express his love for Jesus, despite his failings, which saw him re-established and restored.

I'm not sure how this last year and the start of this one has left everyone; but I'm sure, weeping and broken, confused and doubting, carrying shame, guilt or disappointment due to not standing strong for Jesus, letting ourselves, or Him down – I'm sure some of these will feature in us – in which case Jesus' Qs invite our answers and draw us close to find comfort and redemptive purpose in all we are going through and feeling.

Going back to the finding of the empty tomb in John 20:13-17 we realise Peter and John had gone with Mary to the tomb, but they rushed off having found it empty. Mary lingered in her grief and confusion and went on to have the most remarkable personal encounter with Jesus, who called her by name, revealing Himself as her risen Beloved, rather than the gardener. This shows us, it is worth taking time to express tears, grief and confusion in the presence of God, because Jesus meets with us there – and when He's there with us in our lament, there is always Hope.

David the Psalmist knew that for sure and sums things up well when He says in Psalm 116:1-2: I love the Lord because He hears my voice and my prayer for mercy. Because He bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath.

May we do likewise.

Some find it helpful to ongoingly practice 'examen' at the end of the day, processing consolation and desolation experienced through the day. Consolation is acknowledging those things that have given us a sense of connection to God and others, and to our inner self. Desolation is recognising times of feeling out of touch with God, others and ourselves; feelings of turmoil, confusion, and negative reaction. Examen helps us be thankful for the blessings of the day and helps us recognise and turn from the shadows cast over the day, towards God for His light. I've included details on this in our resources for the month.

God gives us all ways to express our deepest emotions to Him [and to others redemptively]. Many of these ways involve Creation itself, or creativity in some form, and creative journaling can be a huge part of that.

All of these ways involve space and time, to reflect, observe, Q, hear, create, remember! You will remember a few years ago God said He had collected all my tears [and I'm a big crier!] and He was using them for us to build a garden together – the garden of my heart, filled with all kinds of my favourite vistas, plants, animals, and birdsong, which I was free to choose [no spiders or daddy-long-legs there!]. There were a few plants He planted there as a surprise for me too, like spikenard and henna, and I could look up their meaning and form and they spoke a message to me from the Master Gardener. This gave me something to do with God, that focussed my attention and slowed me down; it was restorative and prophetic and hopeful. I created a book of my garden, and I can look over it and remember the things shared between God and I that are uplifting.

When I went on sabbatical in 2019 for 3 months, it was discovering creative writing and journaling that brought me to new depths with God – again these things took my focus and time; they delved into my feelings and God's truth was revealed in the ordinary things of life, His word, and in Nature.

A few weeks ago, I started to feel a growing sense of being empty of motivation and passion and a feeling of helplessness to change things. I kept journaling and one morning I looked out of the window and saw the recently pruned tree in our front garden. I saw myself in that tree! My journal entry that day went like this:

The tree outside my window stands stark and bare in the face of Spring. Bulbs sprout beneath its truncated branches; bluebells ring their delicate bells in the morning breeze. Recently pruned, there is nothing left to tremble or rustle, all sounds and signs of life gone. A stump is all that remains of a branch amputated because of disease, so as not to infect the rest. Every twig that offered camouflage and protection removed, including those that had formed a bird's nest and sheltered new life. All is now exposed and uncovered, all beauty destroyed at the hand of the gardener. Why such a heavy hand? Was such destruction necessary? To leave no external signs of life? The Gardener offers His wisdom: 'Right now you cannot see purpose in the pruning but wait and see what this tree will be! Roots are deepening, sap is rising and in time, she will be stronger, healthier and more beautiful than ever before. She will be the vision I always had of her; one beyond what she could see, because I am the Master Gardener and she, the one who trusts herself to Me! Point taken! And the Psalm:

Psalm 72:6+7: Your favour will fall like rain upon our surrendered lives, like showers reviving the Earth. In the days of His reign the righteous will spring forth with the abundance of peace and prosperity forevermore.

And I'm pleased to tell you there are some tightly furled buds beginning to sprout only a few weeks later. I for one, am encouraged!

The people of God used to rely on the Creator, speaking through His creation. They learned of His majesty and steadfastness from the mountains and trees; His power and purity from the rushing streams; His faithfulness from the birds of the air and flowers of the field.

Martin Luther: 'You see Jesus making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers...whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher!

Paul wrote in Romans 1: 19–20: For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things He has made.

David took comfort from that when he was low or grieving: Psalm 42: Here I am depressed and downcast. Yet I will still remember You as I ponder the place where Your glory streams down from the mighty mountaintops, lofty and majestic—the mountains of Your awesome presence.

Many of us would hear God speak similarly and reveal more of His character [in times of celebration and mourning] if we paused long enough to see and hear from the beauty around us, and let it do its work in us. I've just begun reading a book called 'Re-wilding the Church' by Steve Aisthorpe, which is confirming what God has begun showing me in this respect.

Quote: Rewilding is a means, rather than a specified end. In nature [when human control is diminished or ended] and natural processes are allowed to reign, a sustainable, authentic landscape emerges: In the Church, when our focus is on Jesus and being the people Jesus calls us to be, what will emerge is a living, growing, ever-changing Church. Rewilding involves a conscious decision to loosen control and to allow the power [of the Spirit] at the heart of the Church freedom to shape what emerges.

Rowan Williams [Bishop of Canterbury] says our church families need to be the result of when people encounter the risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other. We must not let 'a good expression of Church' rob us of the expression that arises from a genuine encounter of the gospel with the people whom God is drawing together. By creating and maintaining congregational models that require certain functions and roles, we forgo a community that emerges from the gifts of its people, shaped by the context of their lives and the realities of the wider community. But where to start? Rewilding the Church begins not with strategy but with a new identity drawn from Jesus' followers reflecting on who they are.

Rewilding requires us to know ourselves beloved and putting deep roots deep into Jesus, allowing our self-identity to be re-shaped by God's Word and discerning and stepping into His purposes for us. We need to rediscover our first love of Jesus and reignite a passion for living wholeheartedly for Him.

This is surely the adventure we are on as the CL family – the journey of God re-wilding our hearts individually and corporately and that involves change, which can feel like loss before gain, and needs us to process our emotions and express our lament as we go!

Art too can be a great vehicle for expressing deepest emotions and pain, and the healing and recovery that can be received when taken to God. I remember once seeing an artist called Kim Noble [You Tube]; someone suffering from multiple personalities disorder [DID] as a result of horrendous abuse in her past. 14 of her many personalities are artists – they each express their story, their individual experience and their pain in their own name and in their different styles. One paints mothers and babies all the time; another paints the trauma of rituals; another, paints pictures of flowers. She has managed to survive trauma and cope with life through expressing her deepest pains and emotions through her art, giving voice to her disconnected parts, acknowledging them and validating their experiences and grief. This is partial healing, but when done with the Healer Himself, it can be totally transformative.

I'm going to end my talk by handing over to Mel Pooley, who has been given a gift of writing since her recent healing and some of her poems express her story and the presence of God on her journey towards that healing; others glorify Him as He speaks through creation or gives her words for others. Her words carry His presence and affirm to us the benefit of taking time and making space to allow God to heal, restore and bring good out of some of our darkest times. Her words make me so thankful to God and thrill my heart – so enjoy!

CONNECT GROUP & INDIVIDUAL Qs & PRAY POINTS:

Have pens and paper or phones ready to write down our reflections!

Q. What stood out to each of us from the talk on the subject of lamenting? Discuss

Pause and reflect before God, answering Jesus's Qs:

Q: Why are you crying? [John 20:13]

Inviting us to share our pain/grief/losses – write them down and hold them before God. What does He want us to know? Write down first things thought, felt, seen or heard. Ask further Qs if necessary!

Q. What don't you understand? [Luke 24:17–25]. He invites us to share our confusion and disappointments – write them down and hold them before God. What does He want us to know? Write down first things thought, felt, seen or heard. Ask further Qs if necessary!

Q. Why are you troubled and why do doubts rise in your minds? [Luke 24:38]: He invites us to share any crisis of faith we have – write them down and hold them before God. What does He want us to know? Write down first things thought, felt, seen or heard. Ask further Qs if necessary!

Q. Do you truly love Me? [John 21:15]. This invitation enables us to rid ourselves of guilt and shame at letting, God, others, or ourselves down. It lets us express our love for Jesus, despite our failings, in order to be forgiven, re-established and restored – write them down and hold them before God. What does He want us to know? Write down first things thought, felt, seen or heard. Ask further Qs if necessary!

Invite people to share any aspect they are comfortable to share with the group and/or divide into pairs to share/pray for each other.

9 May 2021: Article: 'The Garden of Lament' at St John's Church, Hoxton [stjohnshoxton.org.uk] There are signs of spring all around. The tree planted in the pavement is blossoming again and a pair of magpies are building a nest in its branches. Spring this year seems somehow more spring-like, vaccines and the easing of restrictions bringing with them a sense of new beginnings. Yet this spring is more bittersweet, too. Last year I watched this tree blossoming from my flat window in lockdown. I did not expect to still be living with restrictions when it blossomed again. How little we knew. This spring, we carry the weight of the last year. We can perhaps see where we are headed, but we are not there yet. Our souls and hearts are heavy and worn out.

What do we do with this weariness, with the sadness, anger and disappointment that sits inside us? The searing grief of lost loved ones, gone without goodbyes, mourned behind masks. The cumulative grief of a hundred little losses; missed hugs, lost days out, an absence of freedom, significant life celebrations muted to almost nothing. How do we give voice to all this pain when many of our usual means of dealing with grief have not been available to us?

This was the question that our team at St John's Hoxton, London, decided to tackle. After months of being implicitly told that being in community can kill you, we wanted to offer a space for the community to come together [in a Covid-secure way] to start to heal. The idea of a Garden of Lament hosted in the church grounds, in the heart of our diverse urban community, started to form.

Lament has not - until recently - been a particularly popular topic, but it is there throughout scripture. Biblical authors freely and regularly give voice to their pain, most notably in Psalms and

Lamentations. The writers of these books speak directly to God: ranting, accusing and demanding that he notice and act: 'Wake up Lord! Why are you sleeping? Get up! Don't reject us forever!' Psalm 44:23, CSB.



We can be hesitant to be so blunt with God, but this honesty speaks to a continuing relationship. The Psalmist is still talking to God, still trusting that God *can* do something. Lament recognises that God is in control. If not, why bother crying out to him? Lament also forces us to pay attention to our emotions. Our emotions often draw attention to what is wrong with the world but too often, we rationalise or dismiss them. Yet lament allows us to give voice to our emotion in the sight of God. Lament happens in the gap between what is and what should be.

With all this in mind, the Garden of Lament team wanted to offer a space where the whole community could access simple, tangible actions to start to tell our stories and process our emotions. The response has been profound. Bowl after bowl has filled with stones representing lost loved ones. The large blackboards have been filled again and again with phrases and pictures reflecting on what has been lost and what people miss. Different coloured ribbons representing sadness, anger and fear fill the fence.



But lament also looks ahead to what should be. We are a resurrection people, so there is space for hope too. The 'I hope' board is full of desires for a better society, a better way of living, and expressions of people's faith. There are more yellow ribbons of hope on our fence than any other colour. This itself gives me hope for my community as we start to recover. Like blossoms unfurling their petals in the sun, as we offer our loss to God, may the Son bring warmth and joy to our hearts, and the Spirit breathe new life into us.

Pause and reflect on the article. Q. How does this resonate with us and what colour ribbons would we tie to the fence and why? Q. Would we be adding in a different colour to cover our lament? Discuss

Q. Is there some way we could use this to reach our streets, neighbours, friends, colleagues. How could we offer something similar on a smaller scale to those around us? Pray together for creative ways and opportunities.

16 MAY 2021: Prayer Course 2: Unanswered prayer.

As yet unanswered, or seemingly unanswered prayer can be one of the main the reasons for our grief and lament. The Prayer Course Series 2 focuses on this subject and it is worth listening to the whole course. This week we are considering Session 2 which looks at Maundy Thursday – a day of grief and torment for Jesus. On this day Jesus had the Lord's Supper, was betrayed by Judas; shared His torment in the Garden of Gethsemane and had one of His closest friends deny knowing Him.

Listen to the teaching and apply it to the situations we face and the lament we cry to God. How can we utilise the 4 keys Jesus showed us?

1. Place: Where is our familiar and loved place to share and process our grief and emotions with God?
2. People: Who are those God's given us to walk through our dark times with? Who can we be that trustworthy person for?
3. Prayer: How are we 'casting our cares and processing them with our Father?'
4. Purpose: Explore what meaning there could be in the madness – even when we can't change the situation. How could God redeem and bring any good out of this?

Psalms 88:1-3: O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out to You by day. I come to You by night. Now hear my prayer: listen to my cry. For my life is full of troubles and death draws near.

1 Thessalonians 4:13: we do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

Horatio Spafford hymn [written after losing his 4 daughters on a transatlantic voyage]:

When peace like a river attendeth my way; when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'it is well, it is well with my soul. And Lord, haste the day, when the faith shall be sight; the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, even so, it is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blessed assurance control, that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul. And Lord, haste the day, when the faith shall be sight; the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, even so, it is well with my soul.

23 MAY 2021: EVENING THANKSGIVING/REMEMBRANCE SERVICE RE 286

Bema Podcast Episode 57: Lamentations

[Also Rob Bell: Robcasts 92–96 on Lamentations]

Listen to the podcast and discuss together the parts that were highlighted to us.

Q. Have we hard Qs we want to ask God? Rather than let these come between us and God, take time to acknowledge them before Him and ask Him if He wants us to know anything in response. Write down the first things we think, see, hear or feel. How does what He shows us impact us?

Q. Is there anything God wants us to address in our lamenting? Take a moment to pause, reflect, ask and consider. Repent if we become convicted [not condemned] and let God bring hope for redemption.

If deeper healing is needed to process our grief/disappointment, think about having Healing Prayer.

30 May PAUL: Your talk as on Development Day?

Extra Resources:

Daily Examen

1. Become aware of God's presence: Take a moment to be still. Sit comfortably. Notice your breathing, in and out. Don't try to alter anything about your breathing but just notice it. Note the places in your body that work to help you breathe...the stomach muscles, the chest rising and falling, even your nose and mouth with the air moving in and out. Our muscles work to breathe in, and rest to breathe out. With each breath out, allow your body to become a little more relaxed. Become aware of being in God's presence where you are safe, welcomed, loved and listened to. Welcome the Holy Spirit to speak.

2. Review the day with gratitude: Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details. As you notice these things, be specific and give thanks to God.

3. Pay attention to your emotions: We can detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. So reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Joy? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Frustration? What is God saying through these feelings? Note where in the day you felt a sense of consolation, of being drawn towards God, filled with His peace, energised and fully alive. Also note where in the day you felt a sense of desolation, being drawn away from God – a lack of peace, frustration, confusion... what might the Holy Spirit be illuminating for you in this?

4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it: Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. And listen.

5. Look toward tomorrow:

Consider what tomorrow might bring and pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what's coming up. Are you anxious? Cheerful? Expectant? Fearful? Bring these feelings to prayer. Hold open your tomorrow before God. Ask Him for help and peace.

SHINE: BRINGING OUR EMOTIONS & GRIEFS TO GOD:

2, 9, 16, 23, 30.

Jesus in Garden of Gethsemane – something difficult to face

Mary in garden with Jesus – grieving why weeping; what are you looking for?

Woman with child who died - Elijah, just needed to get to man of God?

Emmaus Rd – confused, don't understand: prayers not answered?

Disciples going back to fishing, lost hope, recommissioned

