

## In search of the Lost Chord

### How to sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land

Activists take pause. Don't just do something: stand there and sing!

But what shall we sing? How do we sing the songs of the Lord in such a strange land?

At times like this, people do turn to the church and faith communities for comfort. That's great and who among us would not be willing to join the volunteer army in order to offer practical help to love our neighbour as ourselves? Spiritual help and re-assurance there is in full measure. The audience for online services exceeds normal attendance and global Google searches on prayer skyrocketed during March 2020. Daily internet searches for prayer in 75 countries have doubled for every 80,000 new registered cases of Covid-19. What about explanation though? That's harder.

Easy answers defy description and explanations of why a virulent enemy is ripping through our communities cannot be reduced to a song in one dimension or a single note.

The fact is we are not very good at lament these days. You won't find many liturgies in the contemporary church crying out for relief from pestilence like they used to. Safer, more secure times have dawned and life is not nasty, brutish and short for most of the people most of the time. We are therefore fooled, lulled, into being a 'feel-good factor church' in a 'feel-good factor' world. Praise and positivity come more naturally – and why not? Isn't happiness the norm? Maybe.

The problem is that we are ill-equipped for life in a minor key. In the contemporary approach to how we react to things, there is little place for the tragic. We are conditioned to view tragedy as being an untidy mess to be swept under the carpet and not talked about in polite society. Grave talk about life and death would not go down well at a dinner party once we come out of our holes. The current emphasis on songs of praise has filled so many with a re-discovery of spiritual delight. But there are other notes as well in this curious thing we call life and the equally curious thing we call scripture.

When it comes to our spiritual response to life, have we over-emphasised praise? Surely not! You could never worship our amazing Lord enough. Yet the throne of God is not only a place of praise, it is a place of lament. As someone said to me once, 'I would go to the charismatics to share praise – but would you want to be buried by one?' Lament is the lost chord despite so much scripture facing head on realities of life. This represents a deficit of pastoral resource. Constrained by naive notions about who God is or how God interacts on a planetary scale, we do not see God in our suffering.

You can't wade very far into the Psalms without realising that community praise is inter-woven with community lament. Both notes are needed. More than one-third of the Psalms is laments, complaint or outraged protest pleading with God to step in. Songs of suffering and songs of injustice are well represented as are anthems of dispossession. 'How shall we sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land?' The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who thought a lot about such things, observed that lament is always 'a dangerous posture'. It may be rejected by God. Yet it leads to new possibilities. Should Covid provoke a longing for change? What if lament led to hope?

When Jesus saw the city, he wept over it. The Praise procession stopped instantly. This was a time now to weep as powerful emotions surged into a river of compassion that ran towards Jerusalem.

What of Gethsemane as Jesus offered up his life with strong crying and tears as he faces his ordeal? Jesus agonised as he prepared to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world. "*During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission*" (Hebrews 5v8). This was intercessory pathos; raw, rugged emotion; lament and prayer knit with very human emotions.

What of Calvary as the Christ, the focus of all that praise, is hung out, naked, before the sun? Jesus was experiencing first-hand the vulnerable nakedness of the derelict sufferer who pours out His soul to God but feels that God is far away.

The empathy of God took Jesus all the way to Jerusalem where He was nailed to a plank of wood one Friday morning. Because of that six hour immersion into agonised desolation and agonising pain, the Christ entered the dark realms of human rebellion to convert that dreadful experience into forgiveness and hope. The cross was the culmination of this extraordinary act of identification but it was not the destination. Beyond death into life and back into the Father's presence, bearing still the scars of His experiences, with the marks of the cross fresh upon Him, Jesus engages in a ministry of intercession. This is what a brief immersion into the human condition was leading up to.

There is someone who resembles us. His earthly life provided the basis for a sacrifice of unlimited power: the self-sacrifice of Jesus became a doorway into the next phase of His ministry. The Son of God has become an intercessor. His earthly life was but a brief interval, the death of Christ the drama of a moment. But the intercessory ministry has been continuing for two thousand years. To be most helpful to the Christian church, theology has to engage with countless issues that are pressing and urgent. It must throw light on what we do and to point the way forward. The theology of intercessory prayer is a vital issue to understand and grasp, for with it lies the future success and effectiveness of the church. Upon the issue of in-depth prayer, an atlas burden of urgency is resting.

Passion and pathos always get through. There is nothing left. We have to get on our knees. The pattern of Jesus' intercession for the world is threaded with fervour and passion. To go and make connection, so must intercession. Involved intercession must take the form of lament, of passionate pleading. Why should God see someone else as he hears our prayer unless we are involved and engaged? By definition, a level of intercession that breaks through will not be love on the sidelines. It will be a love that shares that person's future and destiny as if it were our own, taking their part. We will be praying as if we were that person. Dispassionate intercession is a contradiction in terms.

Every revival in history has been birthed in intercession and every ministry that has engraved God into other lives is forged in its flame. Such intercession marks the spirit of Paul in that most vital part of his letter to the Romans. "*I speak the truth in Christ - I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race*" (9v1-3).

This is lament in full throttle. It leads to hope, hope that is working and inspiring to change things. An emphasis on praise only will yield confident Christians. But will we be equipped for the Emergency?

Paul can instruct us in the rhythms of life and faith. : 'weep with those that weep, rejoice with those that rejoice'. Ezekiel can teach us: the sensitive priest-prophet of Israel who sat amongst the people

in Babylon and felt their situation until it became a matter of blood and fire. Taking tea with Jeremiah has much to say to us: a prophet who wishes to goodness he had a happier message.

Let's go in search of the lost chord. We are not in the mode yet of offering reasons or explanation. That may come. For now, we lament. We sit where the people sit in a mixture of bewilderment and anxiety but also the defiance that refuses – refuses trite explanation and refuses things as they are in favour of how things could be. Lack of lament diminishes the church's capacity for prophetic critique and activism in the face of social injustice. Lament opens the floodgates of transformative change.

Lament is not the last word. We are those that learn to wait for the Third Day. We are not only Gethsemane people; not only are we shaped by a cross. We are Easter people: a people of hope. We celebrate with those that sing from balconies but we have other songs to sing; new songs of hope!

So what will be the first song that we sing when we come back together? Now there's a thought....