

Monastic Scribe LXXXI: November 8, 2024

LET'S LAMENT

I could be wrong but I have the feeling that most prayerful people don't know much about lamenting. We know how to intercede for someone or something that we seek in our lives or in other lives. We know how to say we are sorry and ask forgiveness. The latter probably gets confused with lamenting which is something different. There is a book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible, supposedly the work of Jeremiah the prophet. The focus is on the loss of the homeland in a time of the Babylonian captivity.

There is a lot of lamenting in the psalms, possibly as much as in forty of the psalms. Psalm 12 begins, "How long, O Lord, will you forget me? How long will you hide your face..." The same psalm ends this way, "As for me, I trust in your merciful love... Let me sing to you, Lord, for your goodness to me." This is an individual lament. Generally, these psalms begin with a dirge, naming some sad happening. And, usually, it ends in some expression of thanksgiving and confidence in the power of God. Unlike much that we say in our more psychological age, there is no self-blame, self-pity, remorse, or any blame of others. This is how it is! The transition from dirge to thanksgiving is often very abrupt. The one psalm that ends without thanksgiving is the prayer of desolation of Psalm 87. The last verse reads, "Friend and neighbor you have taken away; my one companion is darkness." I shall never forget our pilgrimage group reciting this psalm in the lower dungeon in Jerusalem where Jesus was, supposedly, held the night before his execution on the cross.

There are also national or communal laments, and these, supposedly, were in liturgical use as the community lamented over some happening. Psalm 44 complains, "You make us like sheep for the slaughter and scatter us among the nations. You sell your own people for nothing and make no profit by the sale." I can picture groups of Jews praying during the holocaust in a concentration camp awaiting execution.

Are there times to make such lament in our own lives, in our own times? Surely people go through some horrific pain and suffering, loss and deprivation, and can't find a reason for it all. It is important to name the pain and turn it over to God. It is time neither to deny or rationalize such grief. It is better to sing a dirge.

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I also think there are times for communal laments. Does not the Church have to lament some of its stories, its history, its Popes and priests, which have strained the mercy of God? The sexual abuse crisis immediately comes to mind. Only honest acknowledgement to victims and the community, and admission before God in an honest and transparent way can begin to atone. But there are other abuses of power. The Vatican, many bishops and priests, religious communities may need to lament of clericalism, patriarchy, and other expressions of arrogant superiority that need to be lamented as well.

What about our American nation? We have been fed on the myth that we are not only the strongest, but the best and most superior nation. Admitting mistakes does not come easily. Failure to lament Vietnam put the blame on the poor young men and women of the military who lost friends and lives in the conflict and came home to be ignored. Leaders lied and covered up the sins of the nation.

What has been called the original sin of America is the white, male supremacy upon which the country was formed. The native people of the land were killed or deprived of their lands and culture. Black slaves were imported from Africa to build up a prosperous country. Women remained, as in most counties, subject to the vagaries of the male leadership. Jews, and later Muslims and Latinos and Asians, were treated as second class citizens at best. Different ethnic groups battled for survival and acceptance. Migrants are the whipping boy today.

A feature of our age is the passivity, ignorance, material comfort and greed that the culture inculcates in us as part of a capitalistic and consumeristic culture that reduces people as well as all other creatures of our earth and its natural gifts, as objects to be controlled, owned and manipulated for personal wealth and gain. Does that seem harsh? Until we acknowledge the truth and lament in the communal and individual parts in all of it, such results such as the environmental crisis, will continue to punish us for the lack of harmony and unity we have shattered for the sake of individual rights and comfort. I repeat that this is not for the purpose of feeling guilty or accessing blame. It is simply dealing with reality and turning to the Creator-Spirit of the universe to help us bring us back to being the human creatures that bestows on us real meaning and happiness. Psalm 85 promises us this harmony when it prays, "Mercy and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have embraced. Faithfulness shall spring from the earth and justice look down from heaven."

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So try lamenting in your personal life and for the sake of the Church, the nation and other communal groups. You can share your thoughts with me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.