

15<sup>th</sup> October 2023

## Lamentation

**"Dark is the realm of grief."**

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Otho*

"There are more verses of lamentation in Scripture than there are verses of praise and rejoicing." These were the words of the late Professor of Old Testament in the University of Glasgow, Dr Robert Davidson, in a spiritual care seminar in my hospice, a reminder that lamentation, in any form, is integral to the human condition.

I fear, however, that in a society which purports to be more accepting of honest expressions of feelings, we fail to recognise the importance of lamentation, doing what we can to keep it suppressed. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman poet, Ovid, said this in *Tristia*, his reflections on sorrows:

*Suppressed grief suffocates, it rages within the breast,  
and is forced to multiply its strength.*

And yet, in our restrained culture, this is exactly what we do. We sanitise death, keep it at arm's length, wrap it up in dignity and restraint. A funeral service will, by and large, no longer take place in a family home – where the constraints on the expression of emotion are flimsy at best – but in a crematorium where you're expected to behave, and where the extremes of grief are frowned upon. Gone is the "keening", the wailing, the public expressions of grief, the lamentation, to be replaced by stoicism and fortitude. And I worry about the emerging pattern in which funerals are only expressions of celebration and thanksgiving, and not about sorrow.

In the Old Testament, King David's nation is at war, his precious son, Absalom, among his forces. A messenger returns to tell the King that his armies have been victorious. "But is Absalom safe?" David asks. And the messenger breaks the bad news that Absalom has been killed. And in that moment of despair, David gives himself to lamentation.

*The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept.  
As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If  
only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

So my plea today is simply that we recognise the rightness of lamentation, and to believe that we need not be suffocated by unexpressed grief.

### A prayer for today

*Lord, I weep, and in my weeping, I am lost. Yet in my lostness, I am never alone. Amen*

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