



Lent reflection for March 25, 2024

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Lamentations 1:1-2, 6-12

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become subject to forced labor.

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers,
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.

From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Jerusalem remembers all the precious things
that were hers in days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the enemy
and there was no one to help her,
the enemy looked on;
they mocked over her downfall.

Jerusalem sinned grievously,
so she has become a filthy thing;
all who honored her despise her,
for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans
and turns her face away.

Her uncleanness was in her skirts;
she took no thought of her future;
her downfall was appalling,
with none to comfort her.
Look, O Lord, at my affliction,
for the enemy has triumphed!

Enemies have stretched out their hands
over all her precious things;
she has even seen the nations
invade her sanctuary,
those whom you forbade
to enter your congregation.

All her people groan
as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food
to revive their lives.
Look, O Lord, and see
how worthless I have become.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
which was brought upon me,
which the Lord inflicted
on the day of his fierce anger.

Today's Reflection is by Markus Krah

I find this reading challenging on many levels. First, the lament itself: such despair, such deep, existential anguish, rendered in harrowingly beautiful poetry. In the original, each of the 22 verses of this chapter of Lamentations starts with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in sequence, showing that the misery was comprehensive, running from A-Z. (Some English translations preserve this by starting verse 1 with "Alas" and v. 2 with "Bitterly.")

The text was written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 before the Common Era by the Babylonians. Expressed in the voice of "Zion" personified, it is therefore about death and destruction, of real people and a real city. I find this particularly painful to read at a time of raging wars, including another one around Israel. As a scholar of Jewish history, I have been to Jerusalem many times,

so the text reminds me of a concrete city's history of destruction (and later re-construction). Moreover, as a man I am very troubled by the imagery of Jerusalem as a woman violated by aggressors.

Death and destruction, sexual violence, people kidnapped or forced into exile, all this seems to be so omnipresent in our world that the text feels very timely – and simultaneously hitting us with the very topics that we may want to avoid as we look for comfort and edification. So, what does one do with a Biblical imposition like this one? Two ideas came to my mind, especially in light of Holy Week.

First, not every text must have a happy or hopeful ending, I think. There is a value in just expressing despair and suffering. As a matter of fact, in my experience, we are often too quick to look for a silver lining and don't allow enough space for the reality of darkness in our own lives, our communities, in the world. Yes, the exile of the Israelites ended after some 65 years when the temple was rebuilt. Yes, in Holy Week we interpret suffering and death as leading to resurrection and redemption. But let us first acknowledge what comes before that.

Second, we may bristle at the notion of divine punishment for sins that is expressed in the Biblical passage. The text alludes to sexual transgressions by the female protagonists, who therefore was shamed and abandoned. While this analogy, again, feels especially problematic to me, the larger perspective of the human-divine relationship has a flip side that I find reassuring. By accepting the notion of divine punishment, the voice speaking in the text also accepts the notion of divine authority. In other words, behind her lament is faith in God's power, trust that destruction and despair may not be the last word.

It is out of this faith, I think, that the book of Lamentation is read in the liturgical cycle of both synagogues and churches. This faith gives me a faith that has room for both lamentation and for what I hope comes after.



Markus moved to New York from Berlin with his family for a job in German Jewish history. They live in Windsor Terrace and joined Holy Apostles recently. When he is not chased around by his daughters, Markus enjoys falling asleep with a book.