

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 The Sadness of Our Times
September 22, 2019

There are two main stories in the bible. The first is about Israel, accounted in the Hebrew Scriptures or what we as Christians call the Old Testament.

The other is about Jesus, accounted in the New Testament. Together these two grand narratives are the bible, and it is our firm belief that God has spoken in these texts, and is revealed in them.

There is a general sadness involved in both stories. The story about Israel is of its decline and fall. In a matter of only about 400 years Israel became a nation, divided, and was then conquered in succession by the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

The story of Jesus involves the tragedy of the crucifixion, how the hopes of the Jesus movement endured this catastrophe and discovered resurrection faith, and came to believe that there was meaning in this horrible death.

Church is meant to be a happy place, a gathering of people who celebrate life under God together, and celebrate that the fall of Israel and the death of Jesus did not serve as the end of anything, but only the beginning. What was begun then has not been brought to fulfillment, so we joyfully anticipate it. Yet in order for us to really appreciate the joy of the gospel message, we are required to contemplate its sadness.

The 79th Psalm

This sadness is a matter, simply, of being honest about the tragic side of our experience as human beings, and the bible not only gives us permission to consider it, but requires us to pay it a visit. We do this together, with courage and faith, and with each other. I know it can seem daunting, a negative, but that is not the intent. It is more like a diagnosis and treatment.

An example of this attention to the sadness of things is in the 79th psalm, which compliments very well the text from Jeremiah. It speaks of the great tragedy of the Babylonian captivity. It does not mince words. I think that we who have never been conquered will fail to understand fully the experience of being destroyed. We are meant to understand that the psalmist is not speaking figuratively when he writes:

“O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance, they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble. They have given the dead bodies of your servants as food to the birds of the air, the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem and there is no one left to bury the dead.”

I am reminded of Shakespeare’s play, King Lear, the one in which everyone dies at the end, the whole stage is filled with corpses. As a matter of fact, King Lear became one of Frederick Buechner’s signature themes in his preaching, and he quotes the play at the end, “the weight of these sad times we must obey,

“speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” It is in the spirit of these lines that the psalmist speaks, and forces us to speak.

Jeremiah

And it is not only the psalmist who speaks what he feels about things, Jeremiah did also and he decided at one point not to speak all, but the words themselves burned like fire shut up in his bones, and he had to speak it;

“The harvest is passed, the summer has ended, and we are not saved. Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wound of my people?”

O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.”

He speaks of the enemy, “They have come to drown the land and everything in it, the city, and all who live there.”

These heart-wrenching words are spoken about a catastrophe that really happened about 2600 years ago in Israel. Their experience is only hinted at in all these words that pale before the reality of their destruction.

As Christians, at least once a year we contemplate for at least one day, Good Friday, we so ironically call it, when the horror of Christ’s death was seared into the lives of the disciples, and we ourselves take it all in, even if only for an hour or so, as much as we can take. In this way, we attempt to obey the sadness of our times.

All of Life

The focus on the sadness of things is appropriately countered by a focus also on the goodness of things. Let us remember that the people who God inspired to give us the scriptures are the ones who have lived through the worst, seen it for themselves, and discovered that the dark times have been conquered by the light, evil by goodness, anxiety by hope. They had been around the block a time or two so when they say things like;

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want, God makes me lie down in green pastures,” or

“and it was good,” or

“I am convinced that all our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed in us,”

They can be trusted because they not only spoke in a trustworthy way about their experience of life, but also the word of God to us.

Additionally, let me stress that part of the truth of this gospel is that it applies to all of life, and not merely the

specific circumstances in which it has been revealed, or the ones in our own lives when we have experienced it. What makes the gospel of Christ so compelling is that it rises above all these situations.

It does not matter how one suffers and dies, but we acknowledge that everyone does suffer and die. It does not matter how one experiences goodness and wonder, love and grace, but everyone does experience this grace.

All of life is like a nation being born and growing up and then declining and ceasing to be. All of life is a humanitarian effort to learn to love the unlovable and bless and not curse one's fellow travelers. All of life is sin. All of life is forgiveness.

All of life is a tragedy filled with tears for those we love because of their suffering, sometimes even for ourselves, if we are up to it. If we are not, then in accepting Christ by faith, life becomes a journey towards, among other things, the ability to be up to it.

Diving into the humanity in all these texts is an exercise in becoming fully human ourselves, in the best sense of the word. Sometimes we are like Jeremiah and pray that we had a greater reservoir of tears to cry for those suffering, until we can finally cry for everyone, whether they are close to us or not.

The Sad times

So if the gospel invites us in to the sad times, though our instinct is to avoid them at all costs if we can, let us at least not fear them. Let us boldly and courageously march through them because they are not the end of anything just like the Babylonian captivity was not the end and neither, of course, was the cross of Christ. Let us join together with the highest sense of hope that no matter what are the immediate circumstances, good or bad, we are on a journey to meet Christ and that is good, the best of all things, that is happy, the happiest of all things.

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