

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the things that strikes one as odd when coming to California from England is the weather forecast. In England, you have weather forecasts because we have lots of weather: snow, hail, wind, rain, thunderstorms, sunshine, often all in the same afternoon. I don't think California really has weather. It has a climate.

And I was reading this week an interview with a man called Matt Pace, who's a weatherman on 12 News in Phoenix, a place where the sun shines for 296 days a year. His problem, he says in the interview, what makes his job difficult is that he has a very limited vocabulary to work with when describing the weather in Phoenix. He has to describe the same weather every day. He said he can say it's hot, it's above average, it's going to be very hot today or warm. It's hot, hot, hot, or just triple hot. And the article says that he has a PhD in meteorology, which seems a bit superfluous and not a complete requirement for the job he has. His biggest problem isn't working out what the weather will be like, but it's finding out ways of saying what needs to be said and filling up his forecast.

And I think we face a comparable problem in the church. We too need to find new ways of saying what needs to be said. And I'm thinking particularly about how we express deep, raw, negative emotions such as grief, anger, and the desire for revenge. We need to find ways of speaking about such things.

We're good at expressing positivity. When we gather for worship, we're generally upbeat. We have big hymns of praise, but how do we handle the dark, negative side of our feelings? I regularly have people tell me they can't come to church at the moment because they're not feeling happy enough, which always strikes me as odd and rather sad. We don't need to feel jolly to come to church. In fact, church should be somewhere where we can speak a language of pain and suffering.

We need to find the language which we can use when trying to articulate those negative feelings that we have and adjust our sense of injustice when we see the suffering around us in our world. Pain does not decompose if we simply bury it. We need a spirituality that helps us face and express this. As the poet Ovid said, "Suppressed grief suffocates."

And the language that we're looking for can be found in the Bible and in our tradition. It's the language of lament and we have two examples in our Old Testament readers of speakers fluent in this language and they have much to teach us, so I want to just spend a few moments looking at the Old Testament readings for today, which gets me out of talking about that really, really difficult gospel passage, which if someone could explain to me afterwards, please let me know. I'm going to stick with the Old Testament readings.

Firstly, our old friend Jeremiah, who we've been looking at in recent weeks, he's not only behind the book that bears his name, he also wrote another book in the Bible called Lamentations. He's an expert in the field of lament.

Look how our reading begins. "My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick." And he echoes the cry of the people, "The harvest is past. The summer is ended." In other words, famine is on the way. He says, "For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt." He feels their pain and shares in their cry. Is the Lord not in Zion? Where is God in all this? Then he asks, is there no balm in Gilead?

Gilead was a mountainous region east of the river Jordan and there was a rare medicine there called the balm of Gilead. It was an ointment made from the gum of a tree and the balm was symbolic of the power to soothe and heal. Is there no longer balm in Gilead? Has even that gone, Jeremiah asks. And he leaves the question hanging. Lament has no pat answers. It allows us to live with the pain.

I once heard a priest from the Sudan say, lament is what keeps the church in Sudan alive. It was being

able to speak of the dreadful things that the Sudanese people had experienced, that had kept their faith going. They didn't have to pretend. As they learnt this biblical language of lament, they could face up to the horror of their situation and speak about it with honesty and authenticity. They were able to articulate what they felt, even in that dreadful circumstance.

And when we turn to the psalm, we see too somebody else speaking the language of lament. And did you know, that of the 150 psalms, two thirds of them begin as psalms of lament? This psalm therefore is not unusual in its expression of raw human emotion. And we could see in verse one that it's written after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. "Oh God, the heathen have come into your inheritance. They have profaned your holy temple. They have made Jerusalem a heap of rubble. They complain, 'We have become a reproach to our neighbors. We have been brought very low.'"

And in verse five, we see that common question, how long? "How long will you be angry, oh Lord?" And in our lectionary, we stop at verse nine but often the lectionary cuts out the really strong, difficult bits and that's what happens in this psalm. If you look it up in the Bible, the psalm goes on and in the remaining three or four verses, the psalmist gives full expression to their desire for revenge, but that's considered I think, a bit too raw for our readings in church. In these laments, there is no attempt to be polite with God. Verse nine of the psalm begins, "Help us, oh God," the verb is imperative. It's an instruction. It's a demand. There's no deference here. There's no reticence. The psalmist is pouring out his heart to God and what comes out isn't all nice. It includes anger, revenge and complaint. The psalmist holds nothing back.

And there's an encouragement here for us to learn the language of lament, to speak to God with all our hearts, to develop a deep, authentic relationship with God. And one way we can do that is by reading the psalms and adopting them as our

own. When we feel those same emotions that the psalmist felt, to turn to a psalm and just pray those words for ourselves, for our own.

And we can see Jesus himself did that. When he suffered on the cross, the words he cried out to his father were the words from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus himself using the psalmist's language of lament to express his deep sense of isolation and loneliness. The cry from the cross is a cry of utter desperation and emptiness.

And I'd encourage you if you want to scream out to God but don't know what to say, to do as Jesus did, read a psalm of lament and use the words as our own.

Christian faith encourages us to express our deep sadness and fear. We don't have to always be positive. Being nice is not a requirement for discipleship. We don't have to pretend.

Laura had a friend who very sadly died young in a cycling accident and we got a letter from his widow informing us of the tragedy, which was almost celebratory in tone saying how much the family were thrilled that he'd gone to be in heaven and so on. And I can see why they'd, you know, want to put a positive spin on it, as it were. But the letter struck for us completely the wrong tone and was almost un-Christian in its denial of the pain of the situation which they must have been going through.

They weren't speaking the language of lament. Lament is an essential part of the Christian vocabulary. We all need to learn how to speak it or we're not speaking honestly of the human condition and experience. We can dare to explore and express the depths of human suffering, the deep injustices that there are in this world. Because as people of faith, we have a God to whom we can wail and complain.

The Old Testament is full of characters who say to God, "It's not fair. How long?" The prophet

Habakkuk is my favorite. He brings a complaint to God, God answers. And then the title of the next chapter is Habakkuk complains again. He goes back for more.

There are many examples in the Bible of what might be called pit prayers, ugly prayers prayed from the bottom of the pit, out of the pit of despair, and we're all invited from time to time when it's appropriate to pray pit prayers.

Belief in God doesn't make the problem of evil and suffering go away. In fact, there's only a so-called problem of evil because we believe in a God who is good. If there was no God, we could say with the famous British atheist Richard Dawkins that "bad things happen because the universe we live in is full of blind, pitiless indifference." End of quote. Our problem is that we believe in a God who is not indifferent, a God who is alive to the problem of evil and injustice.

Faith allows us, encourages us to be completely honest with God about how we feel and what we see that is wrong in the world around us. And even the ugliest, darkest shout out to God contains an element or a glimmer of hope because complaining bitterly to God is in itself an act of faith. We might not understand God's ways. We might be frustrated by his timing, but we do believe that God will work to bring all things out to completion. We know there is, or there will be, a balm in Gilead.

So, let's strive to learn the language of lament. It's the antidote to despair. And as we bring our lament to God, we don't do so thinking that God will provide a happy ending. In fact, the outward circumstances on which we pray may not change. But in the tears and passion of honest lament, we meet God and faith is forged and shaped by an improbable but stubborn hope. Amen.