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Lamentations 1:1-6

The Lord Brings Grief

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Who did this? There is an eerie calm as the bulldozers move in and begin to destroy the home, the family stand around outside watching as their walls fall in and the tea cups, hastily left on the table, fall to the floor, as if in slow motion. Next to them, witnesses, neighbours, peace accompaniers, a journalist, writing.

Who did this? The bedroom is empty but all her possessions are still there. She is a child, removed to Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre in the clothes she was standing up in. In the room her foster mother begins to empty her drawers and pack up her things.

Who did this? The redundancy pools have been created and the letters have gone out. The names of those to lose their jobs are now known, as are the names of those spared, this time. The Union's efforts are to no avail. The funding stream has been cut. The work is no longer there to be done.

Who did this? The interpreter stands at the bedside with the doctor, translating the wounds on the mutilated victim of torture into a language which may be one where healing can begin. The doctor points to scars, stumps, and fragments of speech are slowly, painstakingly brought together into a story.

Who did this?

O Lamentation.

Who did this?

Who did this to Jerusalem, split into sections, riven with strife, settlers' houses built onto the homes of Palestinians. Who did this? Such a great city? So much history, so much to offer? Who did this?

Who did this to our daughter? She is such a lovely child, so full of potential, life, hope. So much to offer. Who did this? Who would do such a thing?

Who did this to our work? Take an axe to the best programmes, after all that effort of building it up into something we could be so proud of, against all the odds. Who did this? Who would do such a thing?

Who did this? Who made these scars? Who cut and beat this man's body and to what end? Who cut him down in his pride? Such a despicable, shameful thing. Who did this? Who did this?

O Lamentation. Would that I had never lived to see such a thing, to witness such a thing, to tell of such a terrible, terrible thing.

Nothing is inviolable. Cities, families, institutions, bodies. All are fragile and may be violated, and when they are we are brought face to face with the very real limits of human powers. We are not in charge of our destinies. The world we live in is fragile and may pass away in an instant. Power may be used to our benefit and flourishing or to the profound destruction of the things we hold most dear. Which of course we all know, until we are brought face to face with the reality of destruction and left with no answers, just suffering. Profound, powerless, suffering.

And at such times we enter the cycle of violence, from hurt and anguish into blame and guilt; as vulnerable, hurting people we have enormous capacity to hurt more people. We cast around for someone to blame, and throughout Lamentations the blame is fairly and squarely placed upon God. 'The Lord as done this.' 'It is a punishment. We have sinned.' Violence, perpetrated or experienced makes people profoundly unstable and volatile. It shakes the core of being; identity and self crumble and the reality ceases to be recognizably familiar. And in this volatile state answers are

found to the question: who did this? People are found to blame.

Who did this? in the case of the destruction of the City of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, it is 'the Babylonians' and 'The Lord'. Names to ripple fear through generations and still used to evoke murderous destruction and wanton brutality, a laying waste of all that had been. Babylon; Israel's enemy number one. The Lord: Israel's God, willful punisher of a wayward people.

And we all have names we can evoke that can answer the question: who did this? For those sifting through the wreckage of a car bomb it is 'a suicide bomber'; for those watching as their home collapses it is 'the settlers', for the foster parents it is 'the Home Office'; for the workers it is 'management' and 'the government'; for the torture victim it is 'his torturer' though they may have neither name nor revealed face.

O Lamentation.

Deserted, grieving, weeping, betrayed, broken, exiled, sleepless, despised, rejected, dominated, oppressed.

It is so. This has happened. This city is divided, these people are homeless, these jobs are lost, this child is in prison, this body is scarred. It is so. This has happened.

Lamentations tells it straight, as it is, no holes barred. It names the destruction and devastation accurately and knowingly, and with the voice of one witnessing the pain, after the event. This is not the voice of a prophet in prediction mode, it is the voice of the prophet speaking of the pain in such a way that it may be heard and known. A quiet voice perhaps, but compelling, careful, poetic. This has happened. It has happened to Jerusalem, to your institution, your family, your body. For those listening, caught up in the devastation the voice comes as a relief. It is a relief to hear the pain brought out into a public place and by one so good with words, so good at naming the pain and doing so in a language which we recognize as ours, not in the all too familiar euphemisms; of 'settlement'; 'downsizing'; 'assimilation'; 'border control'; 'collateral damage' but in the language of raw grief and experienced pain. The voice opens a possibility for justice. This has happened. This is the cost. This is the pain. Listen. Act.

Deserted, grieving, weeping, betrayed, broken, exiled, sleepless, despised, rejected, dominated, oppressed.

It is not an abandoning God, not this time. In the Psalms, maybe, but here the LORD comes with a gift. Grief. Because grief is indeed a gift. The honest naming of sadness, the acknowledgement of the full agonizing extent of the pain and the loss, the brutal destruction, when it comes – and it may take a long, long time – grief heals. The LORD has brought her grief. Yet as the naming and blaming flood out in a stream of crafted lamenting words the demanding prophetic voice of pain steadies into safety, into a new awareness, into the possibility of restoration, of justice.

It is not the Lord who did this, it is the Lord (Lam 5: 19,21) who restores and remembers and renews. It is the Lord who takes the blame, absorbs it, draws the poison from the wounded, embittered, grieving soul. It is the Lord who comes, through lamentation, to break the cycle of violence, to be the one who is to blame, for as long as it takes to cover the totality of the grief, so that the violence may cease, grief may do its healing work in peace, and a safe, flourishing cycle of reconciliation and life may begin, again.

The Lord brings grief.

Grief, God's gift to the broken hearted, the betrayed, the broken, the exiled, oppressed and despised people is the very first stage in the long and constant journey into healing and safety and flourishing. Grief is where we break free of the cycle that oppresses and overwhelms us and we clearly express, or have expressed for us, what the reality of the loss is and we can begin the new work, God's work, of first committing, choosing to live again, to engaging and forgiving, to dialogue and acknowledgement of the failings that are part of being human. Where we can move to live again, in a right and restoring relationship as part of our hope. Where we can come, ultimately, to a place, where it no longer matters who did this, because there has been enough prayer for our enemies and for those who persecuted us; there has been an end to the blaming of self and of others; justice is rolling again like a river, and righteousness as an everlasting stream, and because of this it ceases to be important to know who did this, just that it is over, done, and life may be lived and given anew.

The Lord brings grief.

O Lamentation.

The Lord says: I will lead you into the wilderness and speak tenderly to your heart.

Blessed by God forever. (Hosea 2:14)