



LAMENT
AND HOPE

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“THERE ARE THINGS THAT CAN BE SEEN ONLY WITH EYES THAT HAVE CRIED.”

++ Christopher Munzehirwa,
Archbishop of Bukavu, 1994-1996.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I have been thinking about lament and how this seems to be such a common theme – both in world events as well as in our own lives.¹ Some reading that has begun to open this up for me has been the work of a Roman Catholic Ugandan theologian, Emmanuel Katongole. His latest book is entitled *Born from Lament, The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*.² This is a book that looks squarely at the truly terrible, evil, cruel violence and tragic suffering in Congo recently and reflects on how and why this has happened. He details the trauma and the depth of loss experienced – the loss of community, the loss of humanity and more tragically, the loss of future. I am sure you know some of the horror and suffering – children taken from their villages and told to kill their relatives. A 2011 study indicated that 1,152 women were raped every day during the recent conflict – a rate of 48 per hour. An American study shows that 12 per cent of all Congolese women have been raped at least once.³ I won't elaborate further – the stories are truly chilling. So Katongole asks, how does one live with this? Can there be a future and if so, what kind? And, where is God? He finds the clue to the future in the power and hope of lament.

Katongole believes that in the face of such pain and trauma, the church in Africa (and everywhere!) needs to learn how to lament. He suggests that the African church tends to focus on a powerful God, a God who performs miracles, who is mighty to save and who reigns supreme – all of which is true of course, but that we also need to know how to lament in the face of suffering, trauma and pain. And that the counterpoint to our almighty God is the crucified God, seen in Jesus Christ on the cross, who continues to suffer with and among us – as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”.

So with his insights and an example from Burundi, I would like us to consider lament in three ways: lament as complaint, lament as resistance, justice and innovation and lament as newness and hope.

LAMENT

Katongole reminds us that for Israel, their safety and security are not found in military might and strength, nor in wealth or cyber-security that we might want today, but in their covenant relationship with Yahweh. Yes, the Israelites praised God but they also protested at God, railed against injustice and pressed God for deliverance. We see this especially in the psalms. Of the 150 psalms, 60 of them, or 40 per cent, are known as psalms of lament. There are psalms of praise, psalms of thanksgiving and royal psalms but the largest category is lament. This meant that the core of Israel's life – social, religious and community was framed by lament.

There is a generally recognised structure to these psalms of lament with five elements. Let us take Psalm 13 as an example:

Psalm 13

¹ How long, O Lord?

ADDRESS – *prayer directed to God*
Will you forget me forever?

COMPLAINT – *description of the problem*

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

REQUEST – *they ask for a specific response from God*

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
MOTIVATION – *articulates the reason God should help*

⁴ and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the Lord, **CONFIDENCE** – *confession of trust in God's help because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

These elements of address, complaint, request, motivation and confidence do vary, as they are not all found in all psalms of lament, but they do signify a kind of turning to God which reflects a deep intimacy

¹ A version of this was first presented as a keynote address at the Leicester Diocesan Conference, Wed 20 Sep 2017.

² Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament, The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017)

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

with God. A relationship of trust, intimacy and love is a necessary precondition for genuine lament. When the biblical writers lament, they do so from within the context of a foundational relationship that binds together the individual with members of the community of faith and that community with their God.⁴

Katongole states that biblical lament is not a kind of unrestrained whining at God, nor a kind of angry venting, but rather it is a structured and complex language of complaint, protest and appeal directed to God.⁵ So this makes it a distinct faith language with its own vocabulary and grammar for those intimate and difficult conversations with God when we are hurting.

Another important facet we notice is that lament often moves into praise – the laments and songs of thanksgiving belong together in Israel’s worship. They have the confidence to express the entire range of human emotions before God – doubt/faith, sorrow/joy, fear/trust, life/death – such is the confidence born out of the covenant relationship and a sign of the depth of this relationship with their loving God. What kind of relationship is it if we can only express our joy and faith but not our need, our sorrow, our pain, our trauma, our complaints even?

LAMENT AS COMPLAINT

When Father Gerry Arbuckle spoke at Church Mission Society in 2014, he had some pertinent things to say about lament, mourning and grief. You can hear them here <https://vimeo.com/103220993>

Complaint is also a key component of lament. Expressions of complaint in the psalms range from concern, to utter desperation in the face of illness or before one’s enemies, to protestations of innocence.

To complain seems risky and almost improper. However, I think it shows that the relationship with God is alive, dynamic and open. To complain is to refuse to accept things the way they are; it protests God’s silence and presses God for deliverance. One requires courage to protest in this way against God – but we see it again and again in the psalms and in the prophets such as Jeremiah. It may also be a way forward into newness. In the psalms of lament, while the writers draw on memories of God’s saving actions in the past, there are always the risk and possibility that God will act in totally new ways as a result of this present suffering, so we may see and learn something totally new and unexpected about God. This suggests that Israel understood complaint as an essential part of their covenant

relationship with God. “It is not those who lack faith who complain, but those recognised for strong faith who bring their most honest and passionate feelings to God.”⁶ It ensures that the relationship is alive, dynamic, negotiated, contested.

It is risky – because complaint is a form of protest. It challenges God – “How long, O God?”, “Why do you hide your face?” It puts God on the spot. The psalmists say some outrageous things such as “you are the one who has done this, Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand.” (Psalm 39:10) And what kind of God remains silent to his people’s pleas? Perhaps God is silent not because God is unmoved – but because God himself laments and suffers with us. Jesus’ incarnation and his cry of dereliction on the cross – based on Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” – testify to this.

African-American gospel songs, the slave spirituals, are a powerful expression of their belief that God was with them in their suffering, even while they were living in their whirling vortex of God-forsakenness. The slave songs are drenched in pain and sadness but they also express a spirit of resistance, confidence and hope. What gave them this confidence was the Exodus story – that ultimately God would save or rescue them, and also their identification of their own suffering with that of Christ’s forsakenness on the cross. I am told that during the apartheid years in South Africa, the most popular services were Good Friday services because they could identify with Jesus in his pain, suffering and desolation.

Jesus understood the slaves, the oppressed, the anguish of apartheid, because he too knew misery, anguish and forsakenness – this resonance gave them the ability to endure and to hope. And ultimately it was these spirituals that gave birth to the freedom songs of the American civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr commented: “The freedom songs are playing a strong and vital role in our struggle. They give the people new courage and a sense of unity. I think they keep alive a faith, a radiant hope, in the future, particularly in our most trying hours.”⁷

What about us? How do we engage with lament? Walter Brueggemann and others have highlighted the absence of lament in our churches. Brueggemann connects it with the inability to face suffering or to embrace negativity in our Western world. Glenn Pemberton suggests that the church, as a middle-class institution, has become increasingly embarrassed by

⁴Ibid, 107.

⁵Ibid., 107.

⁶Ibid., 110.

⁷Ibid., 115.

the earthy and gritty language of lament. He writes,

... we have chosen to live protected lives in insulated communities, whether our community is a middle-to-upper class neighbourhood or a church with a fortress mentality. Our lack of solidarity with those in need is what causes us to wonder why these prayers are in the Bible and question who would ever need them.”⁸

Another writer comments that it is because of our increased prosperity and identification with the mainstream. Lament sounds dreary and negative to those who do not wish to be reminded either of their own vulnerability and suffering or that of those around them.

Ellen Davis offers some hard-hitting and challenging insights. She suggests that when we read Psalm 109 we need to turn it 180 degrees so that it is directed towards us and ask ourselves: “Is there anyone in the community of God’s people who might want to say this to God about me/us?” We are active participants in a rapacious industrial economy, regularly consuming far more than we need of the world’s goods. She then projects this idea onto our great grandchildren’s generation – to say nothing of the present majority world – who might cry out and lament to God:

Let their memory be cut off from the earth because they did not remember to act in covenant faith but hounded a person poor and needy, crushed in heart, even to death. (Psalm 109:14-16)⁹

Brueggemann concludes:

A community of faith which negates lament soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems only to be a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne... they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility.¹⁰

A loss of lament signifies a loss of passion for social justice.

LAMENT AS RESISTANCE, JUSTICE AND INNOVATION

So we forget that lament can be a form of resistance and can ultimately bring about newness and hope. We have already noted the African-American slave spirituals are a form of resistance. Lament is also a form of agency. A cry of anguish is not only a way of naming and mourning what is lost but is also a way of standing in the midst of the suffering. And so lament deepens our engagement with the world of suffering and invites us into more active social and political engagement.

Let me offer you a dramatic example of this now by telling you Maggy Barankitse’s story. Maggy is a Tutsi and was caught up in the ethnic massacres in Burundi in 1993. In October, 1993, she hid in the local bishop’s residence as soldiers attacked, stripped Maggy, tied her to a chair and then massacred 72 people, including one of her best friends. Amazingly, her seven children all survived the massacre by hiding in the sacristy. Katongole narrates her story:

After the massacre, Maggy crawled into the chapel. She prayed as she cried, “My mother taught me you are a God of love. She lied to me. You are not love... God, why was I not killed? Why am I here? Why O God? As she prayed and cried, she heard Chloe... The children had escaped by hiding. Bribing the militia with money, she managed to save another twenty-five children from the burning and building ...and as night fell she sought refuge at the home of a German development worker.¹¹

Maggy set up Maison Shalom – houses for children, farms, businesses, a swimming pool, a cinema, a hospital, a nursing school, a micro-credit finance union and even a university. You can see a short clip of Maggy’s story here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dxz9yE0O-Sk>

In 2016 Maggy won the Aurora Prize. The Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity is a new global award that is given annually to individuals who put themselves at risk to enable others to survive. It is a pioneering global initiative seeking to express gratitude to those who put themselves at risk to save Armenians from the genocide one hundred years ago.¹²

There are some important things to note about Maggy in the context of lament. After the massacre she experienced an incredible energy, determination and anger – all of which she turned into setting up Maison Shalom. But the key driver for her was love –

⁸ Glenn Pemberton in Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 180.

⁹ Ellen F Davis, in *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, (Boston: Cowley, 2001), 28-29.

¹⁰ W Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11, no 36 (1986), 64.

¹¹ Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 229.

¹² <https://auroraprize.com/en/aurora/detail/9296/the-aurora-prize-finalists>, accessed 10 August, 2017.

she operates out of an excess of love which is a basic theological principle for her. It was love that made her an innovator. In her words, “Love made me an inventor”. In the face of all this trauma she improvised and innovated so the children could survive, and not only survive but flourish. She invented a new community – not solely Tutsi or Hutu, but a community beyond tribalism. She came up with very practical ideas for the children. Her love was deepened through her grief and lament.

There is something about pain and suffering that are at the heart of love. “There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried,” said Archbishop Christopher Muzihirwa, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bukavu from 1994-1996. In the midst of civil war in Eastern Congo he worked for peace and to build structures of justice, forgiveness and love. He experienced the war, the ethnic violence, the refugee crisis and the destruction of Bukavu. He was a prophet for a new vision of society but after two years as archbishop, he was assassinated – shot dead at a checkpoint.

“There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried.” Out of pain, intense suffering and anger, Maggy found the courage to take risks and to innovate. She was determined that death and evil would never have the last word because she innovated something which offered newness and hope. Because love wins.

It is vital to remember this; that love wins because I need to offer a sad postscript. In 2015 President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a third term. This plunged the country into crisis; thousands fled, hundreds were arrested and many were killed. Maggy had spoken out strongly against the third term, was targeted and she fled into exile where she still is, living and working in Rwanda. The government has shut down all the Maison Shalom programmes, including the schools and hospital in Ruyigi, closed their bank accounts and confiscated all their assets. They have also killed some of the children. These events have obviously deepened Maggy’s lament.

This is not a “they lived happily-ever-after” story yet somehow, this makes Maggy’s story more poignant for me. We do what we can with the resources we have, the knowledge and energy we have and we act according to what we know.

Katongole states that these events call for “a closer exploration of the interconnection between lament and martyrdom in order to highlight the (strange) hope that

the death of the innocent ... offers to Christians in their struggle for peace in Africa.”¹³

Maggy’s story is also an example of someone who resists the scarcity narrative. We need to resist this culture of fatalism. We need to reignite creativity and innovation, have honest conversations about vulnerability and fear of failure, be attentive to the resources we do have and draw on those. Perhaps we just need to look again, or look in new places for the resources that are already available in our communities and passionately resist the myth that we don’t have enough, aren’t good enough, don’t know enough.

One way to resist this culture of scarcity is to practise gratitude and generosity. In her research on shame and vulnerability, Professor Brene Brown discovered that her participants consistently described both joy and gratitude “as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human connectedness and a power greater than us.”¹⁴ This should not surprise us. Practising gratitude is how we tangibly acknowledge that there is enough, that we are enough. This is a deeply Christian insight but also profoundly counter-cultural in our society that preys on our desires to want more, to consume more and therefore to waste more. Gratitude restores our perspective, enables us to be content with what we have and ensures that we remember our generous Creator God.

In the West, we have grown up in a transactional culture which encourages constant accumulation of goods or, when applied to leadership, encourages managerial, command and control-type approaches. What if we lived with more of a gift-culture mentality where we gifted our time, talents, services for the delight of doing so and for the good of the wider community? Surely this is what Sabbath and the Old Testament Jubilee were all about – ensuring that rest, sustainability and ‘enough’ were key values in society. We, however, experience growth as one of our culture’s highest values: greater production, greater consumption, greater commodification and a trust in progress and technology that things will always get bigger and better. What if we thought in terms of stewardship, trusteeship, sustainability, sufficiency and volunteering? We know that volunteering has as many benefits for the person volunteering as for the project. In a 2012 report commissioned to review the benefits for volunteers, researcher Dr Rachel Casiday said, “Volunteering can yield as many benefits, if not more, for the volunteers themselves.”¹⁵

¹³ Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 242.

¹⁴ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly, How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, (Penguin:USA, 2012), 123.

¹⁵ <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/volunteering/Pages/Whyvolunteer.aspx>, accessed 18.08.2017.

Gift culture fosters generosity and ensures that everyone has enough. Gifting and generous communities support one another, share with one another, want to know “how can I serve?” Just as Jesus claimed that he did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45), so a gift culture delights in service. Gifting sets in motion a cycle of generosity where one gift prompts another and so it becomes a kind of virtuous circle: wanting to serve, wanting to give and desiring to bring out the best in one another.

LAMENT AS NEWNESS AND HOPE

We have already noted that lament can have a surprising turn to praise. However, lament and praise are not simply juxtaposed. Rather there can be an unexpected movement which brings about a fresh perspective and new language. So this possibility of lament turning into praise “reflects a transformation and innovation, a novelty that is only possible with the articulation of both pain and belief.”¹⁶ Biblical lament has the potential to bring us to a new place, to a new depth, to a new song of praise which is qualitatively different from the praise that has gone before. It is a new kind of depth of knowledge and experience, only made possible by the experience of suffering and pain. It is a new kind of seeing: “There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried.” This is an important insight for pastoral ministry – that there is newness and hope after pain – but it will be different and we will only arrive there because of the pain.

Perhaps Pope Francis’s metaphor of the church as “field hospital” is appropriate here – repairing the brokenness and healing the wounds – not that we are the sole actors in this regard. But we do offer a theological grammar of hope. By standing alongside those who are suffering, by being with (not doing for or to) we participate in the mystery of God’s own suffering, death and resurrection. It is this participation that mysteriously releases hope. Katongole claims that the African church is a unique gift to world Christianity as a laboratory of hope which “provides a living witness of what hope looks like in the context of violence and war.”¹⁷

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Are we able, in our own contexts, to be a field hospital that heals and binds the wounds, stands in solidarity with the afflicted and traumatised, challenges injustice and innovates to offer hope and bring about newness?

Let me conclude with some words from a poem by Denise Levertov:

Beginners

How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.

there is too much broken
that must be mended,
too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ellington in Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 264-5.

¹⁸ Denise Levertov, “Beginners” in *New Selected Poems*, (Northumberland:Bloodaxe, 2003), 137-8.

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