

PRAYING IN PAIN: 30th SUNDAY B

Every now and then we come across people knocked for six by things that happen to them. We've seen e.g. people on television in deep grief because a loved one has been murdered, or been killed in a car accident, or their house with all their belongings has just burnt to the ground. In the face of such disasters, they may sit on the ground with their heads in their hands, rocking from side to side, or they may just stare blindly ahead. In their extreme pain they are often incapable of saying even one word about what they are feeling. So when someone asks: *'How are you feeling?'* or *'Is there anything I can do?'*, or *'Can I bring you a cup of tea?'* there's no answer. The victims of sudden disaster are simply incapable of answering anything at all. In their numb state they are feeling just too much pain and shock even to hear what is being said to them, let alone focus on what is being said.

The first step to easing their pain is for them to find a language, however slowly, to express it. So we are not surprised to find in the pages of the bible a language to express the pain that comes from loss, and the pain that comes from fear. In fact there are many prayers of lament, many lamentations of one kind or another in the bible. What they have in common is that they are cries from the heart, shouts of suffering, groans of anguish, and even screams for help. One we come across is in the Responsorial Psalm for the 33rd Sunday: *'Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.'*

Cries, shouts and groans to God when people are in acute pain not only help people to express themselves. They are also expressions of hope that things can change, that they can get better. Lamentation, then, is not pessimistic, it is trustful. It refuses to remain powerless and passive in response to suffering, frustration, disappointment, or disaster.

When that poor blind beggar Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is near by, he shouts out his lament: *'Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me.'* Some of those round about resent him expressing his pain and screaming out for help. They tell him to *'shut up'*. But Bartimaeus knows that if things are ever going to change for the better, he must communicate to Jesus the loss of his sight and his lack of an income to buy food, clothing, or any of the necessities of life. He has been blind nearly all his life, and he's had enough of living in his world of total darkness, and he's just not going to take it any more. And with the arrival of Jesus on the scene he's convinced that his one and only chance of a brand new start is now at hand.

His cries for help stop Jesus in his tracks. He tells the bystanders to reach out to Bartimaeus by calling him over to the one who can heal him and change the course of his life. They now change their tune. *'Courage,'* they say, *'Get up; he is calling you.'* Jesus asks him that question of all questions: *'What do you want me to do for you?'*

When the blind man finds words to express his loss, Jesus heals him and commends him for expressing the faith that is saving him. Saved by faith in the power and compassion of Jesus, he uses his new sight to follow Jesus along the road as his newest disciple.

So this marvellous healing of the blind man takes place as the result of a prayer of lamentation. Its story reminds us that in the frustration and anger over bad things that happen to us or others, to situations of acute pain, it's quite all right to give vent to our feelings, and even, like Bartimaeus, to yell or even scream at God for help. After all, God is big enough, great enough and good enough, to absorb all our cries of pain and all our cries for help.

But if, on the other hand, we've been brought up to think that the religious response to pain and suffering should be silence and passivity, then we won't ever pray those prayers of complaint and lament to God that we need to pray. We'll just take it all on the chin, and fall into a crumpled heap of depression and anxiety. To do that, however, means that we will be depriving ourselves of a language to state our suffering. Instead of honestly telling God our loving Father and Mother exactly what we are thinking and feeling, our prayer will be a kind of polite and reverent game of *'make-believe'*.

We will also deprive ourselves of the possibility of help and healing from God in one form or another. Just as Bartimaeus touched the heart of Jesus and found the comfort and healing he needed in his life-long predicament, you and I will also find that our prayers of lament will go straight to the heart of God. In every painful situation and especially when we find ourselves or others burdened with unbearable pain, may we also hear Jesus saying those gentle words he spoke to Bartimaeus: *'What do you want me to do for you?'*!

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