

*The cry of lament*

‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’ That is the heart-felt cry that launches the journey known as advent that we embark upon today, and it is a cry that surely echoes throughout the whole course of human history. Wherever there has been suffering, and heaven knows there has been more than enough of that; wherever there has been injustice and mourning and crying and pain of which there has been far too much, it is this cry that is never far from the lips of those who believe in God: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’ This cry, however, rises up from off this page of our reading in a particular context. There are specific reasons for it here, and it’s worth taking a moment to consider them.

These were dark days for what was left of the nation of Israel.

We can’t be sure of the exact setting of the passage but it is likely either during or shortly after the period known as the exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the city of Jerusalem was defeated by the marauding armies of the Babylonians, the superpower of the day, and leading Jewish citizens were taken away into captivity in Babylon. It was a profoundly traumatic experience for God’s people Israel. Not least was the sheer shock of seeing the temple, that most holy place, the very dwelling place of God, ransacked and burnt to the ground. So if we had read on a little further in the passage we would have heard these anguished words:

‘our holy and glorious sanctuary  
in which our forefathers praised you,  
has been burnt to the ground  
and all that we cherished lies in ruins.’

It seemed impossible that this could have happened: wasn’t Jerusalem God’s city? And wasn’t the temple God’s dwelling place? And wasn’t Israel God’s chosen nation? How could all this happen and how might God restore them? Hence that cry, ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’ Where else could they turn, except to God, pleading for God’s intervention?

What we have here is a good example of a genre, a particular kind of literature that we find in the Bible which we call lament. A lament is a cry of pain. It is the cry of a soul in anguish. And there are many examples in the Bible. Indeed there is an entire book called ‘Lamentations’ which mourns Jerusalem’s defeat and the horror of exile, and there are many psalms too which are an expression of this kind of pain. Often they include an acknowledgement of failure and of sin, and behind this lament is a recognition that Israel had let God down. They had been entrusted by God with so much – called to be a light to the nations, called to be God’s pride, privileged by God. But they had spurned their blessings and nowhere was that more graphically displayed than in the destruction of the temple, God’s very dwelling place. And Israel’s sin is expressed so mournfully in v.6 of our reading:

‘We have become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind,  
take us away...’

And in the course of the Christian year there are two seasons when lament is called for: the two seasons that precede the great Christian festivals. In the six week period before Easter we have the season of Lent, and in the four week period before Christmas we have the season of Advent, and both of these are time of introspection, a time for us to step back and to consider the state of our world and the state of our own souls, and to confront the dark side of human life in the world. And there is nothing morbid or indulgent about this. The simple fact is that we cannot fully embrace God’s great acts of salvation, we cannot fully celebrate the fact that God does indeed tear open the heavens and come down to bring salvation – without facing up to and recognising what it is that we need to be saved from. We cannot rejoice in the light without first confronting the darkness. And maybe this year as much, if not more than usual, we need a time to lament.

After all, who would have imagined a year ago that we would be celebrating Christmas this year in such extraordinary circumstances, and after so many distressing months? So much has been lost to this virus. Many have lost loved ones. Many have lost jobs and livelihoods. Many have been denied the simple joys of life that we take so much for granted: human community and contact and celebration. But beyond the pain of Covid there are all the usual features of our world that afflict us every year and that call for lamentation: the poverty to which so many are consigned, the inequality and injustice, the conflicts and the terrorist outrages, and the world and nature groaning and sighing from human exploitation and from the effects of ecological disaster and climate change. The trouble is that we are not very good at lamenting. We think of church as a place to praise and to rejoice, not a place to cry and to express pain. And in a world that no longer takes God seriously or from which God has been banished the sounds of lament and grief just echo back at us from an empty sky. We have lost the capacity to cry to God, ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!’

There is, however, another side to lament which is equally important, and which we also shy away from. And here I want us to notice the startling candour and honesty that we find in this section of Isaiah, not just in the verses that we read but in the preceding chapter as well. What we find here is an extraordinary conflict of emotions targeted at God, a strange mixture of accusation and confession. Listen to verse 15 of chapter 63:

‘Look down from heaven and see,  
from your holy and glorious habitation.  
Where are your zeal and your might?  
The yearning of your heart and your compassion?  
They are withheld from me...’

In other words, ‘come down from the safety of ‘on high’, come down, God, come down from the detached protection of heaven and show a bit of commitment, a bit of passion and a bit of compassion’ Dare we talk to God like that? Again, just a couple of verses later in chapter 63 we read quite shockingly:

‘Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways  
and harden our hearts so that we do not fear you?’

Did you catch that? Yes, we’re sinners who do not fear you as we should – but you harden our hearts! Or again, I wonder if you noticed verse 5 in our reading:

‘But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.’

Yes, we sinned, we transgressed, but it’s because you hid yourself! You weren’t there for us! And just listen to the sadness, the pathos in v.8 of this passage:

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay and you are the potter;  
we are all the work of your hand...’

God, we are so dependent upon you, your children, your creatures – yet you have turned your face away from us.

Here is conflicted Israel. Here is Israel’s turmoil. Here is their shame about themselves and their sin but also their anger and their recrimination at God and God’s behaviour. ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!’ is also a cry of anger and resentment. And dare we talk to God like that? Well, this too is part of lament as we find it not least in the psalms. God does not get a free pass in lament. God is in the dock too. And we do not do justice to the full scope of the Bible’s witness if we do not face up to the questions raised about God by our troubled world and our troubled lives. Yes, in a lament, we find ourselves questioned: what have we done? What have we done with the world we’ve been given, with the life we’ve been given? What have we squandered? But questions are raised about God too – the old, well-worn question of how we square a God of love with a creation groaning in pain, questions about the injustices of life, questions about unanswered prayer. Sometimes Christians seem loath to go there. We feel we need to protect God, to protect our faith. And when others who struggle with faith or reject it raise these questions we can be over-

defensive, feeling a need to fight God's corner, to exonerate God. Or we succumb to trite and inadequate answers that do no favours to the mystery of God or to our faith.

Well, if Advent begins with this passage then maybe it can be a season for this kind of candour. It can be a time for honesty about ourselves and our troubled world, a time of confession and for prayer. It can be a time to apply that cry, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down' to our world in all its weariness, to where it is groaning in pain. But it can be a time too for honesty about God, a time to question, a time to recognise the doubts and the difficulties that so often accompany faith, and a robust faith needs that that too.

Christmas, the coming of Christ does not give us simple answers. It does not solve the problem of evil and of suffering. It doesn't make God comprehensible. Christmas does however present us with a world in which human beings are in desperate need of salvation. And it presents us with a mysterious God, who we cannot fathom, but who hears the cry of Isaiah and who does indeed tear open the heavens and come down. And in so doing he shows himself to be with us, accompanying us, refusing to let us go despite our folly and our shame. And when we are open and honest about our struggles with God and with faith, it is this reassurance that we find ourselves gripped and held by. It's what keeps us going, and keeps us faithful. Amen.

Creator God,  
 Maker of all things in heaven and on earth,  
 God who in the beginning took clay,  
 and moulded and fashioned it and breathed life into it,  
 we worship and praise you.  
 Advent God, come amongst us in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth,,  
 Remaking and recreating our fractured world,  
 we worship and praise you.  
 Spirit of God,  
 Life-giving breath of God, that blows through your world  
 to renew your creation and makes us yours  
 we worship and praise your holy name.

O God,  
 far above and beyond this troubled world,  
 we praise you that you have torn open heaven  
 and come to amongst us to dwell,  
 sharing our joy and our sorrow.  
 We praise you that in Jesus  
 you have shown your faithfulness to us,  
 offering yourself to us that we might receive new life.  
 We confess to your our sins.  
 We acknowledge our faults and failures,  
 and all that we do to disfigure and spoil your good world:  
 all that prompts our cry to you to come down and to save us.

O God fire us afresh with your love,  
 reshape us that our lives may reflect your glory,  
 for we pray in Jesus' name and in his  
 words we pray together saying....