THE NEW SHOFAR

Let us not confuse God's silence with apathy. We want to goad God into speaking before it is time. This he does not do. This he will not do. God will not be hurried in his grief. Our God is a God who gives grief its time. He laments fully. Marlena Graves

HOPE

The Crucified Christ is our only Hope when all hope is gone

Over the last few years, I have spent more time than I wanted or expected to in oncology departments of various hospitals. First, it was bowel cancer and just recently this was expanded to include prostate cancer. I had reasonably thought that one was enough, two a little unfair! Those in the waiting rooms were burdened with similar thoughts and anxieties. In one way or another, we, patients and our supporters, asked: **Why me Lord?**

The experience of God being "unfair" is not new. The Bible is filled with God's chosen people who have asked the same questions of the same God. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, often found himself pleading: *Why me Lord? Why is this happening to me, your servant?* It seemed that the greater the faith of the individual, the greater their mission in life, the more challenging their dilemmas, the greater their lament and their prayers of anguish.

Unique among the prophets, Jeremiah shares not only his message, but also details of his anguish as a messenger. Asserting that the prophetic task is difficult and costly is an understatement. Jeremiah knows that it was unlikely the people would heed his warnings and so the destruction of Jerusalem was inevitable. All this suffering because of the stubbornness of God's covenanted people! Therein is the source of his pain. God?

Jeremiah's words portray the heart-wrenching despair of a man whose life is turned upside down *because* he answers God's call. For Jeremiah, the pain is so deep that he, like Job, curses the day of his birth and with anguish almost too deep for words, expresses the wish that his life would end before it began. Where is the peace and light for which he yearns, the consolation that he cannot find in the darkness engulfing him?

God flogs those he loves (Hebrews 12:6)

One of the early texts in Greek I studied as a young theological student was a sermon from ***Chrysostom*** (347 AD) on the letter to the Hebrews. What challenged me was his assertion that…*chastisement is profitable; therefore, chastisement is a participation in holiness. Yea and this greatly: for when it casts out sloth, and evil desire, and love of the things of this life, when it helps the soul, when it causes a light appreciation of all things here (for affliction [does] this), is it not holy? Does it not draw down the grace of the Spirit*? What the great Church Father understood was that suffering is an invitation for believers to share in the sufferings of Jesus. He alone can offer meaning to what appears to be without meaning and pour out the grace of courage to offer our sufferings to God in Christ. The crucifixion and death of the innocent Jesus of Nazareth is our invitation to look beyond the present suffering and darkness and to turn to Christ's defeat of death and his rising to eternal life. Where he goes, we too are invited to follow and therein we have the strength we need to persevere.

Back to the oncologist's waiting rooms. I enjoy talking with people there and most were more than happy to share their hopes and their pains though much of that was invested in the science, the medical knowledge and powers to heal. At the same time most search for a context in which to place their cancers, one in which cancer does not dominate, for if cancer rules then all hope is gone. They are no different to Jeremiah, just men and women wondering why a good God would turn their lives upside down so decisively. What had they

done wrong? How are they to deal with suffering and death? The only message I have to share is Jesus Christ. On the cross, writhing in the pain of crucifixion he cries out *my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* But they are not his final words, for as death arrives, he gives witness to the way to live in the face of darkness: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (life).* That is our invitation to find peace in God's enduring love.

Jeremiah projects his anger towards God because he feels that suffering such as his should not rain down on those who are doing the divine will as best they can. The suffering he bears at the hands of those who hate his message and so hate him he takes up and lays before the throne of God. Why do the faithful ones have to endure so much while the wicked appear to prosper? Facing rejection and persecution by his community (20:1-6, 37:11-21), Jeremiah finds himself at the edge of despair. When is enough, enough?

In this moment of spiritual crisis, Jeremiah experiences God as less than benevolent, as *The deceiver.* Persecuted by all, he stands alone. All his relationships — with the divine and with humans — are in disarray. How can he prevail, continue when all hope is gone? He cannot contain himself and he pours out his frustrations and anger on God.

The opening verses in **Jeremiah 1:4-19** describe the prophet's call to ministry. Jeremiah initially resisted God's call. From the outset however, God's reassurance convinced him that the task, while not easy, would be successful because God's promises would be fulfilled, that divine grace would protect him from all harm that may come his way as long as he perseveres in faithfulness. In the end, while God prevailed, Jeremiah suffered and he quite reasonably asks *how is that fair?* Given the rejection he experiences, his anguish should come as no surprise. We all know those moments of pain and loss.

We persevere, even in the face of the mysterious ways of God

The prophet struggles because he cannot help but preach, even though preaching comes at a high cost. He is a laughingstock, mocked and rejected by his community. Jeremiah, for his part, persevered with his confidence in God's love and mercy, and at the same time airs his angers and frustrations before the unfathomable ways divine justice works. Justice, he knows will come to pass even though the "how" of that divine justice remains hidden from him. God is the One Hope he can find nowhere else. God is the one light darkness, cancer or even death cannot diminish. When all else fails and our fragile lives move inexorably towards its final moments, we know in death life is changed, not ended. We have Hope.

We, like Jeremiah find peace in praising God. *Labouring and overburdened* it is his lamenting, his vigorous engagements with God that provide him with the grace he needs to find light in the darkest of situations. The wise among us would do well to learn from him. In uniting our suffering with the unjust sufferings endured by Jesus we find that God makes those burdens lighter, that Christ shares those burdens alongside of us. He does not need to end our pains, our fears, our suffering for us to find that hope and peace. His presence is enough to sustain us through all that comes our way. Therein is **my/our** Hope too.