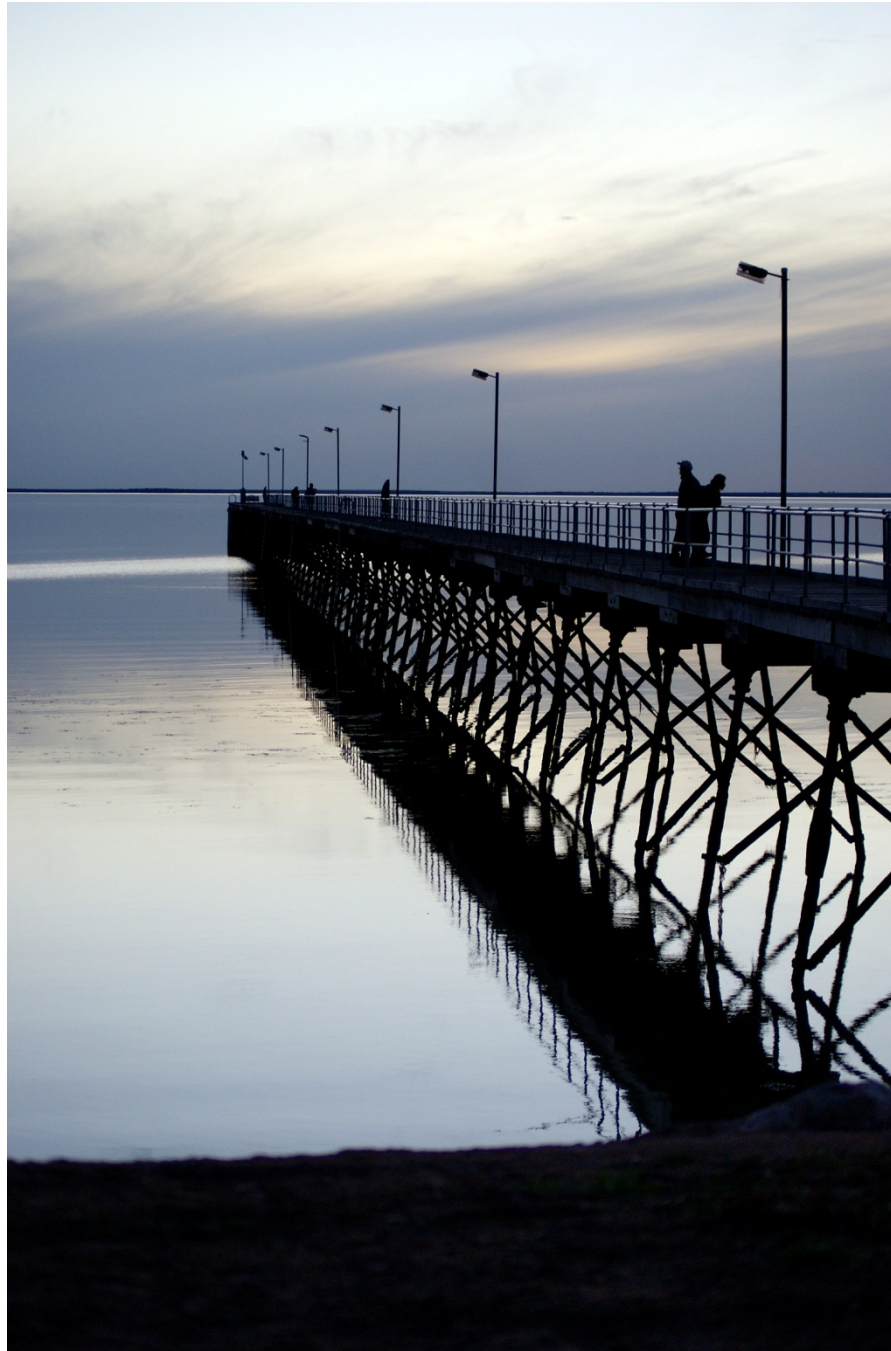


The Anglican Diocese of Willochra



Presidential Address
The Rt Rev'd John Stead
Third Session of the Thirty-Fifth Synod
6th & 7th May 2017

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities*

So, opens the book *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

In rereading this opening sentence, I was struck by how it illustrates our day; and then, of course, Dickens writes: *in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only*; somehow confirming my thoughts. I had forgotten how the sentence ends remembering only the first phrase: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...*

My regular practice in the Synod Address is to focus our minds on the present and the future rather than to just reflect on the 'state of the nation' with a recount of what has happened. I have, over the years, placed great emphasis on the positive, indeed in my first address to you in 2013 I spoke of seeing the glass as half-full rather than half empty. Appreciating the strength we have and using that as the springboard into the future has been a constant theme.

Life can be like sitting at the end of a pier. If you're fishing it's most likely an enjoyable experience. If, however you are there feeling alone and contemplating what it might be like to slip into the water it is most likely not going to be a positive experience. *The best of times ...the worst of times.*

It is, for the church, both the *best of times*, [and] *the worst of times*. The best of times because we can feel sure that those who form the church today are committed to the church and are not attending because it is 'expected of us' by our neighbours and possibly our employer as was once the case. Attendance at church is not a social norm now. It is the best of times because being on the edge of society we are more able to critique society, to be counter-cultural as Jesus was counter-cultural.

It is the worst of times because, in rural and remote Australia, which includes most of the Diocese of Willochra, we experience first-hand the decline in the rural population which compounds the decline in attendance and participation in the church. We suffer, along with the rest of the church in Australia, marginalisation either through a belief that the church is irrelevant, or because there are those who are aggressively opposed to religious expression seeing it as 'the problem.'

More significantly, in the last few years, we have experienced the church's deserved humiliation because of the Royal Commission into the Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse. Some, understandably, no longer trust the church. Many would no longer look to the church to contribute to the debate on moral issues or to cast a picture of a society where the love of neighbour is the bedrock upon which civil society is built. The church is seen as hypocritical. On the one hand, it speaks of itself as a safe place where human dignity is respected and yet fails to protect vulnerable children from sexual predators.

I say that we deserve to be humiliated because it was the institutional church which created the structures and the climate in which perpetrators of the sexual abuse of children could act with not just apparent impunity but real impunity; they got away with it. An institution where the culture could not comprehend that clergy and lay leaders of the church could perpetrate such acts of abuse on a child, where the accumulation of evidence that abuse was occurring was ignored, often because even the highest levels of leadership within the church could not comprehend what and how it was happening.

There was naiveté at play within society, but there were also significant and ultimately inexcusable failures by those in leadership which at times may have crossed the line into collusion with perpetrators. If you doubt what I am saying then speak with our Chancellor, Nicholas Iles, who has attended some of the Royal Commission hearings and has heard first-hand the nature of those failures or if you are inclined, go to the Royal Commission website and read the transcripts of the evidence and come to your conclusions.

My sisters and brothers, it would be easy to assume that Willochra has not been infected by the scourge of sexual abuse of children. While our statistical return to the Royal Commission on the reporting of cases of sexual abuse of children from 1990 – 2015 was a nil return, that should not be something that we should be proud of. Currently, but reported after 2015, we have an active case of the sexual abuse of a child by a clergyperson, now deceased, of this Diocese which will proceed through the *Healing Steps* process. Also, I know of several other cases where children were sexually abused which have never been reported. There may be some of you who fit into that category and if what I am speaking about is causing you to feel anxious, distressed or traumatised, then please be aware that there are people that you can speak to or to report the incident to our Professional Standards Director. They are ready to support you.

It was the worst of times..., it is easy for us to get consumed by how we are feeling, what we are thinking in these circumstances. Easy for us to worry about how this is impacting the church we love and serve. Of how we may have to deal with members of our family who question why we are still involved with a church which allowed such heinous things to happen to children. Easy for us to be angry and to become depressed.

What we must do, though, is not dwell so much on how this makes us feel and think but to balance it with the life changing damage that these cases of sexual abuse of a child have caused to those who were abused.

How do they feel?

What do they think?

How angry are they?

How depressed have they become?

How has it diminished them as human beings?

How have they lived with the loss of their innocence?

How have they coped with intimacy and commitment?

How has it impacted their relationships?

How close have they come to taking their lives?

Of course, the ripples out from the abused impacts their family, their peer relationships, maybe their church family. It may at first be about unaccountable changes in behaviour and emotional wellbeing which only make sense when a report of the sexual abuse as a child is made, most often decades later. The reporting comes as a shock but often helps to make sense of a person's mental, emotional and even physical state of being.

The impact upon a congregation, when someone makes a report against their clergyperson, also has a significant impact which may include denial, 'how could our beloved priest or lay leader have done this?!' We need to recognise that perpetrators of child sexual abuse not only groom the child so that the child is available to be abused, but they groom the family, the congregation, and those in leadership, so that any claims against them will be met with utter disbelief. Congregations can move from denial to anger – sometimes directed against the person who was abused – to depression and shame.

But our hearts, our minds must be focused primarily upon those who were abused – not seeing them as victims but hopefully as survivors.

I may very well have taken you to a 'dark place'! For some of you, it may be a place that you didn't want to go, for some it will have released 'demons'!

My purpose is not to take you into the dark without reminding you that where the light of Christ comes, there is no darkness at all! (1 John 1:5). My purpose is to address realistically where we are and then to draw the road map, grounded in the faith we hold together and in the example we are given from scripture of how we can journey *through the darkest valley* back to the *green pastures* comforted through the journey because *you* [the Shepherd] *are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.* (Psalm 23).

I am indebted to the Rev'd Canon Dr Matthew Anstey, the Principal of St Barnabas Theological College in Adelaide and to several books to which he directed me, among them: *Lyrics of Lament: from tragedy to Transformation* by Nancy C. Lee, and *Lament: reclaiming practices in pulpit, pew and public square*, edited by Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller.

In *Lyrics of Lament* Nancy C. Lee writes: "*Lament, ...provides a cathartic vehicle for human beings to express all aspects of suffering and to help maintain the value and dignity of one's humanity under hardship, ...a call to bring attention to injustice, an anguished plea for respite and consolation, an appeal for intervention not only to one's deity, but to one's community, and to the world community.*" (Lyrics of Lament, p. 27).

Lament is grounded in the Scripture, in the Old and the New Testaments, indeed lament is spoken by Jesus. The Psalms are, in some ways, the most obvious occurrence of lament. There are some 73 of the Psalms which are laments or follow a lament pattern. Of these 29 do not have a transition to praise as their conclusion, they leave the lament hanging in the air. Also, we have the Book of Lamentations written in the context of exile in Babylon, the Book of Job, as well as occurrences of lament in such places as Exodus, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus creates a new lament as he encounters the disciples asleep while he has been praying and later he quotes from one of the Psalms of Lament upon the cross.

There is no evidence within the Jewish tradition for a division or separation between crying out against hardship, injustice or for that matter God's role in an adverse situation and one's faithfulness toward God. Lament, as Walter Brueggemann writes: "[is] *the most visceral announcement that things are not right.*" He goes on to say, in the case of Israel's cry in Exodus, that it is "*not a voice [of] resignation, but instead it expresses a militant sense of being wronged. ...Bringing hurt to public expression...*" (Lyrics of Lament, p.80).

Here is the foundation for recognising lament as a genuine and legitimate response to being wronged, to being ignored, being made to feel like the perpetrator when you are in fact the victim (or better still a survivor), of not being believed when you are telling the truth and of being rejected by those in leadership who carried the responsibility for ensuring that you were safe!

Part of the way forward *through the darkest valley* as we respond to the Royal Commission and survivors of sexual abuse as children is to create space and place for lament. To recognise lament as a legitimate response. Not our lament at what has befallen the church but firstly and most significantly the lament of those who have been sexually abused by members of the clergy and lay leaders. To take responsibility, in the present, which was shrugged off by those in leadership in the church in the past. Part of that responsibility is to reclaim for the Christian Church, in our context, the place of lament, for we have shunned this form of response for too long.

Christians have adopted an approach to the significant trauma of stoic acceptance, that faith somehow implies a belief in and acceptance that what goes wrong is God's will. That 'real' faith, somehow 'takes it on the chin', that the difficulties are some test of faith. Whereas, "*Jewish tradition saw no contradiction between faithfulness to God and lament that is complaint or*

protest about hardship, injustice, and even God's role." (Lyrics of Lament, p.87). We need to debunk the view that what goes wrong in life is a way in which God tests us. If we were to accept such a premise, that God is testing us, are we then implying that God allows a child to be sexually abused to test their or our faith? No, that is clearly ridiculous!

Despite the marginalisation of lament, there is, in modern times, a strong tradition of lament which is found in the African American Spirituals "...*those black and ethnic Christians around the globe who, out of their slavery or suffering, joined with the Jewish approach to lament and made bold calls for change.*" (Lyrics of Lament, p.87). These Spirituals which later informed the development of the Blues, are powerful laments often with that transition to praise, the acknowledgement that God is in control and will bring release to those who suffer. In the 60's we saw lament in the words of Bob Dylan's songs such as *Blowin' In The Wind*.

*How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
How many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?*

*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

*How many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?
How many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?*

*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

*How many times must a man look up
Before he can really see the sky?
How many ears must one person have
Before he can hear people cry?
How many deaths will it take 'til he knows
That too many people have died?*

*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

When we create space for lament we must not, out of our discomfort with what can be raw emotion, rush the lamenter to transition to praise. Remember there is a Biblical warrant for lament at times to hang in the air, unresolved. Instead, we must be willing to sit with the lamenter, often in silence; it can be in silence that we can enter the lament and identify with the lamenter. This movement toward identification with the lamenter, to use that well-worn adage, 'to walk in their shoes for a while' is a significant shift. Nicholas Wolterstorft puts this powerfully when he writes, "*If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognise how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you*

have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning couch." (quoted in Duff in *Lament*, p.11).

We live in a society that is uncomfortable with others' pain, that instead chooses to be anaesthetised by the distractions of the modern age. We need to relearn the place of deep sorrowful anguish, to be comfortable in attending to people in that place and to wait. To move toward the other in empathy, to feel their pain, to cry with them even if that cry is one that denies God's presence: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*, words which come from the beginning of Psalm 22 and which we later hear from the lips of Jesus in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. Jesus calls out in the same words of lament that were on the lips of the Psalmist, he carries the burden of our lament on the cross and makes it his own. Jesus aligns himself with the human condition and takes that into the very being of God's self; God is aligned to the human cry, the human lament. If Jesus can call out in lament to his Father, then surely we can too!

God has demonstrated an ability to interact with humanity in a way which allows humanity to express the full range of emotion from praise to denial, and everything in between and still God stays engaged. The book of Job demonstrates that God is not going to 'cut us off' because we express strong negative emotions toward him. Indeed, from a reading of Job 42:7, "*One can only surmise that God would rather have critical language aimed at God's self, from a person who is in a genuine relationship with him, than pseudo-pious language from [Job's] ...friends whose relationship... with God is in fact, superficial and simplistic.*" (*Lyrics of Lament*, p.102).

Lament, when given an opportunity to be expressed, can be the beginning of healing.

Where lament is forced into the secret place and hidden away, instead of being brought out into the light, we risk compounding the hurt and damage that has already been done. Of reinjuring, in a new way, the one who has already been injured; and so, the lament then becomes lament not about the original abuse alone, but lament about the failure of the institution and/or an individual and then the failure of us to allow for the cry of lament to be made before God and before us.

The lament form, as it is found in the Psalms, can be a good starting point for us all but most particularly for those who need to doubly lament because of an original wounding and being wounded again by institutional failure. Psalm 55:12-14 is a good starting point:

It is not enemies who taunt me—
I could bear that;
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—
I could hide from them.
But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the throng.

The reality is that we have within scripture these excellent examples of lament that can resonate with those in pain, indeed with us, when the situation gets dark. The scripture speaks into our context and for the church to deny the opportunity for lament is, to some degree, to deny the relevance of scripture.

How do we respond in these *worst of times*?

What I have suggested is that we as a church need to recover the place of lament, the place it has in Scripture in both the Old and the New Testaments, particularly in the Psalms which can help us "*identify in the liturgy of prayer the worshippers suffering and vulnerability and provide us with 'a vocabulary of need [and] a rhetoric of affliction'*" (Duff in *Lament*, p.7).

We need to create space for lament in our worship, for space for those who are survivors of child sexual abuse to lament and for us to sit with them in silence and when it is right to hear the recount no matter how painful it is for us. To lament with the lamenter and to 'cry out' to God. To know that in hearing the retelling, in joining in the lament, there can be the beginning of the healing process.

Above all, my sisters and brothers, we need to avoid slipping into the lament about what the church has lost because of the Royal Commission and instead celebrate what it has been taught about how to be a safer church.

Sally A. Brown & Patrick D. Miller (Ed), *Lament: reclaiming practices in pulpit, pew and public square*, Westminster John Know Press, Louisville, 2005.

Nancy C. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: from tragedy to transformation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2010

Quotes from the Bible are from *The New Revised Standard Version*