Lamentations

As we come to the end of our journey through the scriptures of the Old Testament, we find ourselves again looking at the events of 587 BC(E). As we said earlier in our journey, there is some truth to the idea that everything in the Old Testament either leads up to 587 or leads away from 587. This date is the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the desolation of the line of David. We have seen that 587 is the theological focal point of the Old Testament, as the promises of God around Jerusalem, temple and king were seen to be ever-lasting and the coming of exile throws all those promises into crisis. So, the writers of the scripture ponder about how did the children of Israel arrive at 587 and now what will we do following 587.

The book of Lamentations provides a look into the immediate reaction to the devastation of 587. Throughout the Ancient Near East, we find collections of what are called "city laments" that lament the destruction of famous/infamous cities in the ancient world. These laments are particularly poignant in the Old Testament, because of the depth of promises made about Jerusalem, the temple and the Davidic monarchy. The loss of all three would be almost impossible to bear, much less understand.

Lamentations poignantly portrays the pain, sorrow, confusion, disillusionment and chaos that 587 caused for the children of Israel. The loss was one that questioned the very core of their trust in God, their identity and their vocation as God's people. Questions about God's sovereignty and justice, God's loving presence and care, about their future are wrestled with and no easy answers are given.

Like the communal laments in the psalms, Lamentations gives voice to this pain that comes from a community that is in distress, claiming and naming their collective loss. This pain is expressed as disillusionment, anger, distress, and even despair. Yet, like the lament psalms there are also moments where the lamenter ultimately places their trust in God, even though there is no evidence that appears to support that trust. This confluence of despair and hope, lament and trust, loss and faith can perhaps be seen most clearly in a little snippet from Lamentations 3:29 that is often bracketed by parenthesis in many translations – "there may yet be hope". These poignant words speak to the reality of the loss, and the imaginative possibility of a future because God is still God. They are only spoken on the far side of the loss after what Saint John of the Cross would call, the "dark night of the soul."

Reflection Questions

1. AAAARRRRRGGHHHH!! Is the wail that has been translated into the word Lamentations. Knowing that, what for you, has caused that cry of anguish in the past year?
2. Write below a Prayer of Lament for what you named above?
3. The only words from God in Lamentations are "fear not". What is it that you fear? How would not fearing that which you fear change your life?

Notes