

29 August 2020

## **Deep Calls to Deep (Psalm 42)**

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Theologian Raimon Panikkar once said: ‘Worship is above all, truthfulness’.<sup>1</sup> Which means that worship must allow space and time for pain to be truly acknowledged, spoken, felt. Last week, we began a series exploring the pain of this time of pandemic in the light of the Hebrew psalms of exile. The parallel between our current experience and the exile suffered by the Jewish people in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE seems apt. Although we’ve not been taken geographically from home, we have been evicted, in important respects, from life as we’ve known it. Many of us are feeling dislocated and unsettled, weary of provisionality and longing to return to the way things were. And just as the exiled Judeans needed to lament their losses, so last week I suggested that we too might need to undertake an intentional practice of lament. Really facing and naming and grieving our time.

Part of what inhibits this process, however, can be the fear that if we start we’ll never stop, the fear that we’ll get stuck in dissatisfaction and complaint, overwhelmed by panic or despair. So what makes this practice of lament different from mere resistance to what’s so? What makes it potentially fruitful, for us and for those around us? Once again, the psalms give us a lead.

Take Psalm 42, which we just heard. It’s sung by someone in trouble. ‘My tears have been my food day and night’. A whole way of life has gone: ‘These things I remember, as I pour out my soul’; how I used to go with the throng, and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping the festival. But now – ‘my soul is cast down within me’. The psalmist is in a kind of exile, remembering Jerusalem from another land, the land of

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p.125.

Jordan and of Hermon.<sup>2</sup> ‘Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?’, he cries. Twice he speaks of the taunts of those who tempt him to believe himself abandoned, alone, even deluded. They ‘say to me continually, “Where is your God?” But though the psalmist admits his soul is ‘disquieted within me’, though he accuses God of forgetting him, nevertheless he clings to faith, replying each time, ‘Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God’.

At one level, these sentiments might seem a fairly conventional exhortation to keep your chin up – yes, it’s a tough time, but hang in, things will get better. God will come to your aid and your faith will be vindicated. But what strikes me about this psalm, as it has thousands over the centuries, is its extraordinary middle verse. ‘Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your waterfalls; all your waves and billows (all your breakers) have surged over me’.

This phrase, ‘deep calls to deep’, has a double meaning. On the one hand, it’s about the roar of the ‘cataracts’ – the thunderous flow of water, symbol of chaos, by which the psalmist feels utterly overwhelmed. Robert Alter says, ‘The experience of threatened drowning is a familiar image for near death in Psalms, but here it is given startling new power through the linkage with a vast creation in which abyss calls to abyss’.<sup>3</sup> This psalm bespeaks a terrifying plunge into vastly powerful forces, primordial, totally beyond human control. The language reflects that used by the prophet Jonah, who accuses God from the belly of the whale, ‘You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me’ (Jonah 2.3). It evokes, as Walter Brueggemann says, ‘the crushing, irresistible force of disorder as yet untamed and on the loose in our world’,<sup>4</sup> which in our time has taken the form of a global pandemic, incipient

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<sup>2</sup> Scholar Robert Alter thinks this exile and recollection of another land refers not to the Babylonian exile of the whole people, but to a more personal and local unsettlement. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), p.150.

<sup>3</sup> Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, p.150.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, Vol.1* cited in Celia Kemp, *Deep Calls to Deep* (Day 1 Quotes), (<https://www.abmission.org/pages/apps.html>).

ecological collapse, and dysfunctional global leadership. The breakers thundering, indeed, chaos threatening.

At the same time, this phrase 'deep calls to deep' names the depth of the psalmist's need for God – the realization that what is deepest in human being cries out for the unfathomable response of God's presence. These two meanings are necessarily related. A time of crisis plunges us into a deluge of confusion and helplessness, a profound loss of footing. Yet it's as this happens, as all our usual points of reference are swept away, that we finally encounter what is deepest in us – our yearning and vulnerability, our dependence on a reality we never master, our need for nothing less than God to make sense of us and sustain us in being. So the very place we seem to have lost 'God' in the chaotic overwhelming of life is the place we at last truly meet God ... not the god of custom or habit or conventional religiosity, but the One the psalmist names, 'the God of my life' – deep calling to deep.

I began by asking what makes a practice of lament potentially fruitful, for us and for those around us. We've been focusing on the grief, the dislocation associated with pandemic, but we may be lamenting other things too... the undergoing of ageing, illness and declining capacity; the frustration of dreams, the loss of loved ones, confusion in our spirit, despair at ecological destruction and at pervasive, systemic injustice. Lament gives us permission to let ourselves go under, to be flooded by grief, rage, helplessness. But what our psalm, our tradition, testify is that if we are faithful to the truth of this place of overwhelm – neither repressing it nor self-dramatising wallowing in it – if we're simply *true* to it, we will be met here. In the very depths of our need and vulnerability, in the loss of foothold, we discover a paradoxical security and stability. A place, a rock on which to stand. We do not get stuck in chronic negativity or panic, but find the true source of our life ... 'the living God'.

There seems to be a widespread intuition, not just among religious people, that this time of pandemic and global crisis proffers an opening to a new depth for

human being, a chance to re-found our common life. Out of the chaos and unmaking, we glimpse the possibility of a 'new normal', a recovery which isn't simply about 'snapping back' but transforming our relationship with the whole. Almost daily, I see an article in the newspaper (admittedly, it's the Guardian rather than the Herald Sun!) which speaks of this time of overwhelming as an invitation to return to essentials, to simplify our lives and rediscover the possibility of an 'inner life' and of compassionate community. But it seems to me that if this opening is to issue in something truly new, then we need some knowledge of the spiritual disciplines required to keep faith with the process. The remaking of a world out of a season of chaos requires prolonged tolerance of uncertainty, deep listening, and continuous letting go our impulse to assert control. Australian novelist Tim Winton wrote of Australians: 'We are not sea people by way of being great mariners, but more a coastal people, content on the edge of things'.<sup>5</sup> But this is a time that asks of us the willingness to cast out, to be cast out, into the deep.

What does this mean in practice? I've already suggested it means being true to where and how we find ourselves, to lament what needs lamenting. It asks also, I believe, that we stay faithful to and deepen our practice of meditation, contemplation. Because this is the practice that helps us day by day, week by week, to keep yielding ourselves to the reality that is larger than us. It's a practice that strengthens our trust in the One whose spirit moves over the face of the waters and brings life-enabling order from chaos. It seems to me that the more we give ourselves to this surrender, as a way of life, the more we find ourselves living out of the depths of God, and so becoming people who bring God's resource into our relationships and conversations and perspective at home, at work, in our communities.

In the aftermath of crisis, there are many forces – within us and without – that seek to return us to the familiar coast line, back to the safety of the edge we knew.

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Winton, *Land's Edge*, cited in Celia Kemp, *Deep Calls to Deep* (Day 1 Quotes), (<https://www.abmission.org/pages/apps.html>).

But literally in Australia, as well as metaphorically, our beach is disappearing, washed away by the waves. Our calling as people of faith, our gift to the whole, is to dare to meet the chaos and unknowing of this present time, in such a way that we discover in its depths, the hope and steadfast love that is our help and that will recreate our life.