

A Time of Grief (Lamentations 3:22-33)

With the death of Queen Elizabeth, feelings of great sadness and grief can emerge as well as a sense of uncertainty and concern as we enter into an unfamiliar new era. How can we respond? The book of Lamentations was written at a time of extreme grief and insecurity for God's people. Yet, it's central verses hold out a sense of hope in such circumstances.

How do you feel about the Queen's death?

How do you feel about the Queen's death. At the start of his speech on Friday, Charles her son said he had "*Feelings of profound sorrow.*"

Although, she was not our mother, it may be that for you as well, the loss of the queen as a person brings a deep sense of sorrow and grief.

At the same time, her death brings to the end an era for our nation. For most of us she has been queen for the whole of our lives. 70 years is a very long time and through all the many changes, she has been a great constant. As one columnist wrote: "The one element in our collective life that stayed reliably the same has gone. We enter a new future now." (*Jonathan Freedland in the Guardian*)

Such a change of era can leave us with feelings of uncertainty and unease, especially at a time like ours, when our lives are facing so much turmoil: coming out of a pandemic, the cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine.

So, how should we deal with these feelings?

Lamentations

One way is to turn to the Bible and in particular to the book of Lamentation. It is not a 'How to guide' of how to live, but a poem, which was written at a time of total and utter catastrophe and despair for the people of God around 2,500 years ago.

They had not just lost a monarch, their whole city had been destroyed, including the temple which stood at the centre of their identity and national life and expressed God's support and presence for them. Not only that much of the population had been forced to move to a foreign land. This was an unimaginably bad catastrophe and the book of Lamentations expresses the deep sorrow they experienced in profound and moving ways.

Yet in the centre of the book are these verses of hope. As we face a difficult period in our national life, that comes nowhere near the struggles they were facing, let's see what we can learn about seeking hope in the midst of sorrow and uncertainty.

Acrostic / Mnemonic

The poem is an acrostic, in the original language, each set of three verses starts with the same letter, then in the next three verses it moves on to the next letter.

To help, I am going to use a similar device as we explore what this poem is saying - a mnemonic, where the first letter of each point spells out a word. The word I am going to use is the word, 'Queen.'

Quest

"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." (3:25)

We all need a 'quest' or to seek something in life. It gives direction and purpose and if it is the right quest, it can help us and others in life.

On the queen's 21st birthday, before she became Queen, she said what her quest was for life:

"I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service... God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it." (Princess Elizabeth, 21st April 1947)

It was a commitment rooted in faith and seeking after God.

And it was tested powerfully while she was still young. She became queen at only 25 years old, much sooner than she had hoped and facing the death of her father at only 56. At a moment of deep sadness, she was thrust into a life of demanding service. Yet, she could do it because she also sought God, his help and blessings.

If we are going to cope with the sorrows and challenges of life in ways that are good and flourishing, then the first thing we need to do is to seek God, because only in him do we find our ultimate comfort and security.

Unfailing

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;" (3:22; NRSV)

The word for 'steadfast love' is sometimes translated, 'loyalty' or 'devotion'. The queen exhibited this in her role over 70 long years, never failing in her service, even doing her duty to welcome the new Prime Minister a couple of days before she died.

King Charles III:

'Her dedication and devotion as Sovereign never wavered, through times of change and progress, through times of joy and celebration, and through times of sadness and loss.'

Yet, unfailing as the queen was, no person can be totally unfailing in their love and concern, because we all one day will die. That's why we need to seek God as our ultimate source of comfort and security. Only he is truly unfailing, he will never let us down, not even by dying.

Eternal

"For the Lord does not reject forever." (3:31)

God's love is unfailing, yet at times we may feel that he has rejected us. That was certainly true for the people of God when Jerusalem was destroyed. Yet, the poet sees beyond the temporary to the eternal. The Lord does not reject for ever.

So, we need to take the long view. After all, that is what Jesus did. Even though he faced God's rejection and judgement on the cross, he knew that in the end the rejection would not last, that God would not reject him forever. God proved the point by raising Jesus from the dead.

When the queen died, many people noticed the rainbows that appeared in our rather stormy weather at the time. In the Bible the rainbow is a reminder that God's love will always be there. He will not reject forever. He can see us through even the storms of death, if we are willing to seek him.

Emotional

"Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love." (3:32)

The queen in many ways was a distant figure, not showing many signs of emotion, but those who were close to her would have seen the more emotional side:

King Charles III: 'And, as every member of my family can testify, she combined these qualities with warmth, humour and an unerring ability always to see the best in people.'

Yet, the queen's presence and sympathy at moments of great tragedy were an important help to those suffering great loss. The people of Aberfan in particular remember her sympathy and support when she visited them after the landslide that killed so many including many children.

We can often think of God as a distant figure. Yet, this poem portrays him as a God of compassion, someone who is emotionally moved to act when he sees the suffering of his people.

As Christians we believe Jesus came and lived among us. In Jesus Christ he came and the emotion, most associated with Jesus was compassion, as is the emotion described of God here. When Jesus saw the needs of people he was moved emotionally and acted miraculously. This is what our God is like. This is the God we need to seek, the God who feels our pain with us.

New

"They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (3:23)

And actually, when we seek God, his compassion is experienced every day. Just as the sun rises to bring us a new day, so God's emotional and loving commitment to us is renewed each and every day - even when we face moments of great sadness, grief or uncertainty.

There is a freshness about God's support and help, his love for us never grows stale, it is always fresh, whatever we are going through in life.

Queen

We've spelt out Queen and we are reminded again of the sadness of losing a much-loved monarch and the uncertainty of a new era without her.

Yet, as we've focussed on this poem that looks for hope in the midst of deep despair, we've been reminded that in God we have hope. Let's seek him in all our lives, that like the queen we may have the strength to serve through all the ups and downs of our lives.