

Lament & Hope
Preached at St Mark's on 27 September 2025
Romans 8.18–24 & Luke 19.41–48
by Ian Wallis

‘The exterior of the building wanted for nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers, it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.’ (Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.222ff)

In Jesus’ day, the Jerusalem Temple was one of the great wonders of the ancient world, attracting admirers from far and wide. When King Cyrus of Persia granted permission for the Jewish Diaspora to return to the homeland in the sixth century BCE, the Temple that was subsequently rebuilt under the oversight of Ezra and Nehemiah was a relatively modest affair, lacking much of the splendour of the former structure erected during King Solomon’s reign some 400 years or so earlier.

But after Judea and Galilee had fallen to Rome in the first century BCE and Herod had been appointed to rule over the region on the Emperor’s behalf, it wasn’t long before he embarked on major construction projects in Jerusalem. To begin with, Herod greatly expanded the Antonia Fortress, standing at the Northwest corner of the Temple Mount, creating of bastion of military authority and might for his Roman overlords, reminding all worshippers and pilgrims where earthly power effectively resided.

Next, Herod began work on the Temple and its precincts, rebuilding the sanctuary, massively extending the platform on which the Temple stood, creating concentric courts of increasing sacredness, reinforcing the status of the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, as the epicentre of divine presence on earth, and the sacrificial cult, administered by an elite caste of priests, as the sole means of making peace with God and restoring divine favour.

King Herod’s extravagant Temple expansion was a vanity project second to none, only made possible by enforced labour and crippling taxation. Nor should we overlook that the Temple served not only as the religious fulcrum around which Jewish life revolved, but also as the seat of the Jewish government, the national treasury and the equivalent of our HMRC (His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs). Together with the Antonia Fortress, the Temple represented in architectural form the domination systems controlling the lives of ordinary Jews: religious control, political control, economic control.

And as we learned from our Gospel reading this morning, when Jesus approached Jerusalem for what would prove to be the last time, he wept over what he beheld, and lamented what the powerful had done to the God he worshipped, as well as to God’s rule of justice, forgiveness and compassion he served.

A lot of claims have been made in recent decades about the Jewishness of Jesus – of how he embraced the structures, rituals and beliefs characterising the Jewish religion. Yet, what is manifestly clear to anyone who reads the Gospels with an open mind is that he no more believed God dwelt in the Holy of Holies and could only be approached through mediators and sacrifice than you or I do.

For Jesus, God couldn't be contained within any human structure or restrained by any human ritual. God's presence was all-pervasive and all-pervading, woven with the fabric of creation. And God's justice wasn't some spiritual calculus associated with the assuagement of transgression, but the right ordering of relationships between human beings and with God.

Little wonder that when Jesus looked upon the Jerusalem Temple, an edifice the Roman Historian, Tacitus, noted resembled a fortress (*Histories* 5.8), he wept tears of lament; but lament's tears soon gave way to lament's rage, as rather than simply passively accepting the status quo, playing his part in this domination system of manipulation and control, he would actively attempt to do something about it.

So Jesus enters the outer courts of the Temple, overturning the tables of the merchants selling their animals for sacrifice, and those of the moneychangers who supplied the requisite currency for their purchase, before driving them out, like evil spirits from someone possessed.

Scholars point out that the provision of suitable currency and victims was essential for the smooth operation of the sacrificial cult, so why would Jesus want to banish those supplying these services. Why? Because, as Jesus responds to those who interrogate him in the Temple, loving God is not about offering sacrifices, but living sacrificially in the service of others – loving friend and stranger, sinner and saint, in God's name (Mark 12.28-34; Matthew 9.13; 12.7; cf Hosea 6.6)

And although Jesus' lament-full rage would cost him his life, his death would give birth to fresh hope that God could once more break free from human manipulation and God's kingdom could finally be rescued from some distant prospect of what awaits us beyond the grave and begin to take root in the present.

Lament's tears giving way to lament's rage - passive suffering to active protest; and out of lament's rage, hope is born as protest, the refusal to accept the status quo, opens up new possibilities.

Let me offer you another example of how this dynamic can operate in other contexts, one drawn from my own ministry. On Christmas Eve 1998, the parish church where I was then incumbent was crammed with a congregation exceeding 400, most of whom were under the age of 25. For many of those who had gathered, this was becoming something of a preoccupation.

Each month that year, a young adult member of the community had died as a consequence of drink, drugs or joy-riding. Today's victim overdosed on a cocktail of illicit substances washed down with an ample supply of Smirnoff. He had been married barely two weeks and left behind a bereft widow cradling their baby son.

It was largely the same group of mourners who gathered for each funeral. And as the year progressed, with one death after another, a sense of fatalism began to take hold – locking many into a mindset of being caught up in some sort of horror movie playing out in real time in which they were reduced to little more than puppets in destiny's hand. It was no longer a question of 'if' there would be another death, but 'when' and 'who' it would be.

I found the outpouring of grief on that occasion almost suffocating. It took a long time for everyone to file into church and settle. I stood at the front in silence, disturbed to the core with sadness, wondering what was required of me on this occasion. After a few moments, training and experience kicked in as I led the assembly in prayer:

*GOD, OUR COMFORTER,
you know our hearts and share our sorrows.*

*We are hurt by our parting from Kenny whom we loved:
when we are angry at the loss we have sustained,
when we long for words of comfort,
yet find them hard to hear,
turn our grief to truer living,
our affliction to firmer hope*

The service continued with a selection of Kenny's (not his real name) nearest and dearest sharing reminiscences, regrets and aspirations – augmented with a compilation of his favourite songs. Eventually, it came to the Commendation, the 'nitty, gritty'. No one save the priest could utter these words. Before speaking, I paused, looked again at Kenny's widow and felt a surge of what can only be described as rage.

Leaving the security of the lectern, I stood by the coffin trembling and wrapped the lid hard with my fist, time and again. Almost instantly, I had grabbed everyone's attention and you could have heard the proverbial pin drop.

'This can't carry on,' I pleaded stutteringly, 'we have lost too many; we must lose no more. We cannot suffer the senseless loss of another young life. If Kenny means anything to you, honour him not by following in his footsteps, by learning from his misadventure and making sure you don't repeat it.' A stunned silence ensued as my words registered; in truth, for some, they hit home like a boxer's blow. What I had just done was pastorally inexcusable, liturgically outrageous, yet, as it would be proved be, energizingly hopeful and life-giving.

We wouldn't gather again in those circumstances for the best part of five years and some of those present later admitted that Kenny's funeral brought them to their senses and helped them to break out of their nightmare and begin to affirm life once more, including, thankfully, Kenny's widow and closest pals.

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Now, at this point, you may well be wondering what has any of this got to do with the current environmental crisis. Well, as it happens, quite a lot.

Think back to Jesus lamenting over how God had been hijacked and exploited by the domination systems pervading Galilee and Judea – religious, political, economic – disempowering people, reducing them to cogs in a machine over which they had no control as they were forced to pay taxes to fund their oppressors and to make sacrifices to approach their God who had been wrenched beyond their reach.

Are we not similarly disempowered and constrained? In our case the Temple is dedicated to capitalism, built on the foundations of unrestrained economic growth, limitless private ownership, inequitable distribution of wealth and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Most of us lament this state of affairs, especially, in this season of Creationtide, the devastating consequences of capitalism upon planet earth. And yet we contribute ...

Each time we invest our savings without inquiring into the sectors and companies we are financing. Each time we purchase cheap clothing without establishing its provenance. Each time we step onto a plane without considering other sources of transport. Each time we fill our supermarket trollies without considering the impact of our shop upon the planet or the conditions in which our food was produced. Each time we install a replacement gas boiler without considering greener alternatives. Each time we pique our curiosity by performing an AI search without due regard for the energy consumed.

Each time we thoughtlessly undertake a raft of routine tasks are we not perpetuating the status quo, offering our sacrifices at the capitalist altar? We may not like it. The effects of it all on the environment may grieve us deeply. Our feeling of powerlessness may be profound. And yet the capitalist cogs continue to turn until we reach that table-tossing, coffin-thumping moment when lament's tears give way to lament's rage and we resolve enough is enough and hope is born.

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