Is there any time when the Church is not experiencing stress, tension and division? I don’t think so. Today we are certainly in a time of tension. From all points of the compass divergent opinions are being uttered about the way the church is heading and about what we need to do about it. We have people like an eminent theologian who recently stated that many of the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council and particularly the theologians who advised them had succumbed too readily to ‘modernity’. They believe that something has been lost and that the healthy tradition of the church to a smaller or greater extent has been abandoned. We need to restore some of our previous ways of thinking and behaving. On the other hand many others who were excited by the vision of Vatican II believe their expectations have been dashed. Their hearts are touched with disappointment, sadness and even despair. They experience an impulse to walk away from the community they loved so much. Being human all of us who take up a stance along this spectrum are affected by various emotions and movements of the spirit. They can be anger, fear, anxiety, frustration or an inclination to act decisively to implement our plans and vision. I am sure one such emotion in all, or at least many, of us is grief. We can experience a profound mourning in our hearts, if only we are brave enough to acknowledge it and enter into it.

I am going to suggest, in this article, a way of praying that will contribute something to our managing our spiritual and faith journey at this time. Of course, I don’t suggest that it is the only way of praying now. I think it can assist us in facing up to our blind spots – and we all need redemption from them. As we come to recognise more and more our prejudices, our preferences, our unconscious needs, our vested interests, our worries, our concerns – and we all have these, too – we can empty our hearts of them. We can enter into a free space in which we will be able to hear and discern more clearly the voice of the Spirit whispering to us and suggesting to us what the Spirit wants us to contribute to the dialogue that will help resolve the tensions amongst us.

As an interlude I want to make a comment I learnt from Jules J Toner SJ in his remarkable work: Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s teaching on Christian Decision Making. He teaches that I can truly discern in my prayer that I am being called to utter one opinion. I may be surprised to hear someone claiming that they have discerned a call to utter a different one. This should not surprise us. We have not discerned the truth of the matter. We have discerned what the Spirit wants us to contribute to the dialogue. In the engagement with different opinions all of us might discover we are being led into a new formulation that the Spirit wishes us to reach in charity and respect by listening to all the ways the Spirit is ministering to the church through my heart and the hearts of all the others who are engaged in the dialogue.

All, then, can engage in the way of prayer I am suggesting, without fear of compromising their integrity.

I want to take as our model Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. As I pray the psalms I believe I am following the ancient practice of seeing that city as an image or symbol of God’s people, God’s Church. When we pray for Zion’s Children and Zion’s people, and when we cry out about the devastation and ruin inflicted on the city we can cry out for the church. When we admire Zion and

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1 Matthew 5:5
2 The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Lois, MO. 1991. Pp 51-53
3 Luke 19:41-44
4 E.g. Ps 48, Ps 46. V 4,5,7. Ps 74. Ps 147 esp vv 12 – 20 etc.
rejoice with her people we can transfer that to the church, too. There may be a need for many today to lament with Jesus as he looked down over Jerusalem and wept for her. We may need to contemplate him doing that and follow him in lamenting what we see happening in the church today.

The lament, of course, is a wonderful biblical prayer. One of my favourite passages in the Old Testament is chapter 3 of Lamentations. I believe this book is attributed to Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary. He sits among the ruins of the utterly devastated city and pours out to God his grief, perhaps, even, his anger at God. Just listen to bits of chapter 3.

I am the man familiar with misery under the rod of his fury.
He has led and guided me into darkness not light...
He has wasted my flesh away, has broken my bones...
Even when I shout for help he shuts out my prayer...

Notice that. The prophet’s seeming experience is of darkness and of God’s refusal to listen. How often we seem to experience the same sort of thing. Let’s continue:

He has shot deep into me with shots from his quiver.
He has given me my fill of bitterness, he has made me drunk
With wormwood.
He has broken my teeth with gravel. He has fed me on ashes.
I have been deprived of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is
And thought, ‘My lasting hope in Yahweh is lost.
Bring to mind my misery and anguish; it is wormwood and gall.
My heart dwells on this continually and sinks within me.

The prophet has recounted his pain and anguish, his grief and his rage. He just hasn’t looked down on the ground and remained isolated. He hasn’t turned in on himself. He’s really entered into relationship with his readers or those who heard him cry out, and even with God. As a result he experiences an extraordinary transitional movement in his heart. If he’d stayed turned in on himself and not yelled out to others I am sure he would have ended up in suicidal despair. And where does he move to? Notice the extraordinary next verses:

This is what I shall keep in mind and so regain some hope:
Surely Yahweh’s mercies are not over,
His deeds of faithful love not exhausted;
Every morning they are renewed; great is his faithfulness!
‘Yahweh is all I have,’ I say to myself, ‘and so I shall put my hope in him.

Notice the context and the movement. The context is relationship with those he cries out to. Because he is not just moaning to himself and indulging in sickly self-pity, because he is engaging with others he is led from despair and grief to hope. He focuses on God and I am sure in that focus he begins to see things more clearly. By turning to God he is able to empty his heart and leave a space for God to fill. He is enabled by God to see things with the eyes of God and to understand things with the mind of God.

This is a regular pattern in Old Testament prayer. I’ll quote only two well known psalms. The first is Psalm 22. We all remember how it starts:

My God, my God why have you forsaken me?
The words of my groaning do nothing to save me.
My God, I call by day but you do not answer,
At night but I find no respite. VV 1-2

How often is that our experience! God doesn’t seem to be listening to our prayer. The God of love and faithfulness, of affection and loyalty seems callous and indifferent. Notice what the psalmist is doing, though. Again, like Baruch, he’s not turning in on himself. He’s crying out to God. He’s entering into a relationship with God.

I am sure he’s in touch with his rage, too. In v 16 he talks in unflattering terms of a pack of dogs surrounding him and a gang of villains closing in on him. In verse 19 he moves onto an urgent plea, the passionate nature of which is so obvious. As he moves through these various moods he commits himself to praising God and summoning others to praise God. (v25, 26) Like Baruch in Lamentations he can then begin to remember the goodness of a faithful and loving God. As he prays with the emotion of the moment he is drawn one step at a time to a place of freedom. He can do at the end what he couldn’t do at the start. He can praise God.

Of you is my praise in the thronged assembly...
Those who fear Yahweh will praise him,
‘May your heart live forever.’

He is less tormented by swirling emotions. He is more in a place of tranquillity. In such spaces we are more free to hear what God is saying and so make the contribution to our dialogues with others in the church more in conformity with the desires of God’s Heart.

The same pattern is seen in Psalm 69. It begins:

Save me, God, for the waters
Have closed in on my very being.
I am sinking in the deepest swamp...
I am exhausted with calling out, my throat is hoarse.
My eyes are worn out with searching for my God. VV 1-3

After a while he expresses his rage:

Vent your fury on them,
Let your burning anger overtake them.
Reduce their encampment to ruin,
and leave their tents untenanted. VV 24-25

Finally as his heart has poured out these disturbing emotions, as he has vented all this power of emotion he can see clearly again:

For God listens to the poor,
He has never scorned his captive people.

Here again is the tranquillity that enables clear sightedness and discernment. One can feel the uplifting of his heart as he moves into a more trusting space:

For God will save Zion,
and rebuild the cities of Judah. V 35
There are two points I wish to emphasise. The first is that we are honest with ourselves in our
prayer. We pray as we are. We do not recoil from any emotion or feel there is something wrong with
us if we are besieged by very uncomfortable and even what we think are embarrassing emotions.
We express them. The second point is equally important. We express them to God. As a friend of
mine said many years ago, ‘God’s shoulders are big enough to carry our load.’ We must enter into a
relationship with God. If we just mumble our curses and complaints to ourselves we’ll become bitter.
If we lament and express our grief and sorrow and disappointment only to ourselves we’ll end up
hopeless. But if we express ourselves to God we leave a space where our emotions were that the
Spirit of God can enter. The Spirit then can lead us through the tumult to a place of tranquillity. As I
keep saying, it is in this space that we can hear what God wants us to contribute to the dialogue that
will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah. (Ps 69) 1 Peter 5 V 7 refers to Ps 55.V 22. ‘Unload all
your burden onto him, since he is concerned about you.’ Ps 55 says ‘God will sustain you.’ If we
lament to God we will be led on an amazing healing journey.

Paul Castley MSC