

THINGS TO DO AT THE END OF THE WORLD I

Lament

Introduction

Some people in Ireland can date the end of the world very precisely.

- It happened the day the phone rang and it was a bank manager calling in their loan.
- Or the day they were called to the office to be told their job was going.
- Or the day the letter was received from their financial advisor to say their life savings were gone.
- Or the day the son, husband, father, brother or friend was shot dead on patrol or collecting a pizza.
- Or the day the religious institution still refused to admit guilt even after the report was published.

On that day the world ended.

The thinking and reflection for and preparation of this bible reading and tomorrow's has taken place at a time of almost unprecedented upheaval on this island.

At a macro level, economic meltdown and the collapse of confidence in government both in London and Dublin.

At a more immediate and horrific level the Republic has reeled under the impact of the Ryan report into child abuse in church-run institutions. The nature and scale of what many have sought to cover up, or wish away, is leading to a re-evaluation of the old romantic ideas of Ireland of the thousand welcomes, and we have yet to see what might emerge.

North of the border, the shootings of Sappers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar and Constable Stephen Carroll caused shock and outrage and the community was stunned into realising that the evil that we dared to think might have been banished from our streets, was still among us.

And lest we try to corner it among a disaffected republican rabble, it's abiding presence was confirmed with the horrific murder of Kevin McDaid in Coleraine.

The besetting sins of both sides on the border still have a place among us.

What is there to do?

The settled stories that we have told ourselves of peace and prosperity have been ripped apart and the world as we knew it has ended. And the question comes, what has the church to say in a time when the world has ended.

Many have sought to explain what is happening here in terms of economics or politics or sociology, but it can also be understood spiritually. And that, it seems to me, is our characteristic task for this time to articulate theologically in word and deed the ending that we are undergoing in our day.

To do this, I want to name two things that we can do, and for this reason I have titled the bible readings today and tomorrow, 'Things to do at the end of the world'.

Tomorrow we will consider the task of investing in the future when the world is ending.

Today though, the task is a heavier one and a more difficult one, and one which I don't think we are particularly prepared for in our day.

The first thing to do at the end of the world is to weep for it's passing. But to do so we need to rediscover the biblical language of lament.

Jeremiah the prophet gives bold and sustained consideration in his words of lament to what God is doing in the world in his day, even in the ending of the world.

Jeremiah and the Ending of the World

In the world of ancient Israel, the prophet Jeremiah found the words to articulate the profound ending in Israel as the city of Jerusalem was sacked and the brightest and best carried off into captivity. He found words adequate to the task of speaking the depth of the change that Israel was enduring.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the forced captivity of its people was experienced as a world-ending event. Jeremiah writes

4:23-26

23 I looked at the earth,
and it was formless and empty;
and at the heavens,
and their light was gone.

24 I looked at the mountains,

and they were quaking;
all the hills were swaying.

25 I looked, and there were no people;
every bird in the sky had flown away.

26 I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert;
all its towns lay in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

To Jeremiah it was as if the very creation of the world had been reversed and the formlessness and emptiness of pre-creation had returned.

Words of Lament

This was not something to be celebrated, nor something to be accepted without complaint, but from the depths of Jeremiah's soul came words of intense grief and pain.

Let me read gently and carefully, words from the book of Lamentations.

Let's read them together not as a text to be analysed and parsed and exegeted, but read to be felt. Read for their pain and lament. And let's read them with a picture of contemporary Ireland in our mind.

Lamentations 5

1 Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us;
look, and see our disgrace.

[we who once bestrode the world as a beacon of peace and peace-making, famed for our capacity to create a thriving economy]

2 Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens,
our homes to foreigners.

[our addiction in the past to debt and consumerism means our future and the working futures of our children have been sold to outsiders]

3 We have become orphans and fatherless,
our mothers like widows.

[now no-one wants to know us. We don't get invited to the world economic conferences. Our advice is not sought by the world's hotspots]

4 We must buy the water we drink;

our wood can be had only at a price.

5 Those who pursue us are at our heels;
we are weary and find no rest.

6 We submitted to Egypt and Assyria
to get enough bread.

[now our jobs are being exported unless we reduce the wage bill. Now international banks and financial institutions will only lend to us at punishing rates and we work only to pay our debts. Our economic policy and tax rates are being determined by global forces and we have no control]

7 Our fathers sinned and are no more,
and we bear their punishment.

[sixty years of shameful behaviour has now come to light and we know that those who were charged to keep safe the vulnerable abused those in their care. And we did nothing. And we carry the shame. And after a brutal 40 years of violence and sectarian hatred people are still being murdered for their sporting allegiances, or the colour of the uniform they wear. And we have learned to live with it. And we are ashamed.]

8 Slaves rule over us,
and there is none to free us from their hands.

9 We get our bread at the risk of our lives
because of the sword in the desert.

10 Our skin is hot as an oven,
feverish from hunger.

11 Women have been ravished in Zion,
and virgins in the towns of Judah.

12 Princes have been hung up by their hands;
elders are shown no respect.

[our political leaders have been found out and fairly and unfairly hounded from office by a public eager for scapegoats]

13 Young men toil at the millstones;
boys stagger under loads of wood.

[our children and young people stumble under a burden of hopelessness and despair. An epidemic of suicide and substance abuse among the young threatens to overwhelm us]

14 The elders are gone from the city gate;

the young men have stopped their music.

15 Joy is gone from our hearts;
our dancing has turned to mourning.

16 The crown has fallen from our head.
Woe to us, for we have sinned!

[PAUSE]

17 Because of this our hearts are faint,
because of these things our eyes grow dim

18 for Mount Zion, which lies desolate,
with jackals prowling over it.

19 You, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to generation.

20 Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?

21 Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return;
renew our days as of old

22 unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure.

What to do, then?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann asks the profound question:

What difference does it make to have faith which permits and requires this form of prayer?

Let me make three very quick comments.

1. When the world is ending praise can become a tyranny.

Relentless praise in spite of the circumstances can lead to an unreality in our faith that ultimately leaves us, and our people, unprotected from the real stuff of life. It also means that our witness becomes increasingly irrelevant in the world, particularly in a world as painful and hurting as contemporary Ireland is today.

When the world is ending, we need to give careful thought and consideration to our liturgy and the content of our corporate worship. And we need to find space for lament.

2. lament helps us grow up in our faith.

Rather than staying like children in a land of make believe, where everything always works out if we just trust in Jesus. Lament for the state of the world, lament for the ending of the settled world as we knew it, means that the Gospel is placed in a larger context.

Lament teaches us that the Gospel is concerned with greater things than simply my well-being.

3. lament keeps the language of justice always before us.

It places everything in God's hands – even the blame for what is happening, because that is often the safest place to put it – and stirs him to action.

Lament helps protect us from the bullying need to find someone to blame. It helps prevent me from seeking revenge. It protects me from bitterness.

Brueggemann again writes,

“A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne..., they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair.”

It seems that skilled lament is necessary for a healthy democracy. And perhaps, if we had learned earlier to lament the awfulness of what was going on among us, perhaps we might have prevented the suffering of thousands, North & South of the border.

That alone is worthy of lament.

Within Jewish tradition, the feast of Tisha B'av is a regular, annual commemoration of the pain and suffering of the Jewish people throughout history. It is a formal, public remembering of the destruction of the Solomonic Temple in 586, during which it is estimated 100,000 Jews perished. It is a public remembering of the sacking of the 2nd Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. And the Holocaust is also remembered on this day with prayers and fasting.

It is a day set aside to be characterised by the absence of idle conversation, smiles or laughter. Shaving and make-up are banned, lights are dimmed and the Ark, where the Torah is kept, is draped in black. Laments for the dead are sung at the Wailing Wall and the book of Lamentations is read.

We should not be afraid of such things. Such lamentation helps teach us that this must never happen again. Such rich resources honed in the cauldron of suffering stand as a rebuke to those who peddle a cheap gospel promising to make us feel good and satisfy our deepest needs.

Maybe we, as the Church, should join calls for a national day of mourning, an annual reminder of our guilt and sin, reminding us of what went on in our industrial schools and in the grubby sectarian war.

By this we could help ensure that the church doesn't become the place of excuse, or obfuscation or blame or blithe ignorance. But the place of hope.

Because when the world is ending we need both to lament it's passing, but also to hold out hope for what is next.

Glenn Jordan
Skainos Director
<http://www.skainos.org/>
<http://crookedshore.wordpress.com/>