

DISCONTENT WITH THE DIVINE

26th October 2025

(20th Sunday after Pentecost)

READINGS¹

Jeremiah 14:2-9, 19-22

*Judah mourns,
and her gates languish;
they lie in gloom on the ground,
and the cry of Jerusalem goes up.
Her nobles send their servants for water;
they come to the cisterns;
they find no water;
they return with their vessels empty.*

*They are ashamed and dismayed
and cover their heads,
because the ground is cracked.
Because there has been no rain on the land,
the farmers are dismayed;
they cover their heads.*

*Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn
because there is no grass.
The wild asses stand on the bare heights;
they pant for air like jackals;
their eyes fail
because there is no herbage.*

¹ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

*Although our iniquities testify against us,
act, O Lord, for your name's sake;
our rebellions indeed are many,
and we have sinned against you.*

*O hope of Israel,
its savior in time of trouble,
why should you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler turning aside for the night?
Why should you be like someone confused,
like a mighty warrior who cannot give help?*

*Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!*

*Have you completely rejected Judah?
Does your heart loathe Zion?
Why have you struck us down
so that there is no healing for us?
We look for peace but find no good,
for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.*

*We acknowledge our wickedness, O Lord,
the iniquity of our ancestors,
for we have sinned against you.
Do not spurn us, for your name's sake;
do not dishonor your glorious throne;
remember and do not break your covenant with us.*

*Can any idols of the nations bring rain,
or can the heavens give showers?*

Is it not you, O Lord our God?

*We set our hope on you,
for it is you who do all this.*

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

When my sons are really angry with me, they would often call me names! Often, I let them do it. After all—I like to tell myself—their brain is still developing and they are still exploring the boundaries. My love for them will also be big enough to handle their complaints. So, I often let them express their anger to me in words that, in a different context, would not be acceptable at all.

That's the key: it depends on the situation. In a different time, when there is no disappointment involved, it will be totally inappropriate for them to use the kind of language that they use when they are angry with me; and I let them know that.

Friends, disappointment and its expression are normal parts of any living relationship. They are fundamental in our relationship with God also.

In the Scriptures, the people of God often openly express their disappointment with God. As we can see it in many parts of the Bible, biblical characters often protest against God for what seem to be great injustices in their life. Yes, the Scriptures are filled with examples when the people rage against God and heaven for their misfortune.

So there is no doubt that lament is a fundamental part of Israel's spirituality. We can see this in our reading today from the book of Jeremiah.

Here, in our reading, Jeremiah goes beyond orthodoxy.

Now, in the Bible, the Israelites often see God as the One who dwells amongst them. After they leave slavery in Egypt, God lives amongst the people in the tent (tabernacle) and travels with them in the desert. Later, God dwells amongst the people in the temple in Jerusalem.

Yet, Jeremiah calls God as "a stranger in the land," "a traveler turning aside for the night" (Jeremiah 14:8NRSVU)! Jeremiah laments that God is now more like someone with little to no interest on the people; someone who has not invested in the land.

Another popular image of God in the Bible that Jeremiah laments against is God as a commander of the heavenly army: *Elohe Tzevaot*, often translated into English as the Lord of Hosts. Indeed, God is often seen, in the Hebrew Scriptures, as a military commander who fights on behalf of the people of Israel; a strategist who helps them defeat their enemies.

Yet, in our reading, Jeremiah, once again, deviates from this orthodox belief and sees God more like “someone confused,” and even “a mighty warrior who cannot give help” (Jeremiah 14:8-9 NRSVU)!

But, instead of seeing these laments as sign of a breakdown in relationship between God and Jeremiah beyond redemption; the laments—are actually coming from the depth of the relationship between Jeremiah and God. Jeremiah expresses his disappointment with God and holds God accountable because, deep down, he still cares about his relationship with God. Jeremiah laments because he still hopes that God would change course to meet his expectation.

So, lament does not necessarily signal a lack of faith. No. The opposite of faith is not lament; the opposite of faith is *indifference*. The very fact that the people of Israel still often express their laments towards God is a sure sign that they still value their covenant with their God.

No wonder that the laments in our reading in Jeremiah are done within the context of hope. Jeremiah closes each lament in our reading with a testament of hope.

“Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us,
and we are called by your name;
do not forsake us!”
(Jeremiah 14:9 NRSVU)

“Is it not you, O Lord our God?
We set our hope on you,
for it is you who do all this.”
(Jeremiah 14:22 NRSVU)

Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, once witnessed three Jewish scholars: a rabbi, a teacher, and an educator who put God on a 'trial' in a secret meeting in a concentration camp. They accused God of breaking the covenant by failing to protect God's people by stopping the Nazi's atrocities.

These three then deliberated and found God guilty of crimes against humanity!

After delivering the verdict, they all stood in silence. The rabbi then invited the rest of the group to start their evening prayers.

What a profound event. Their lament did not come from the shallowness of their belief; it came from a deep well of their faith. That's why their faith remained despite their bitter disappointment with the Divine.

Another great modern lamenter in the last century was the German philosopher, Friederich Nietzsche. In his book, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he makes the main character in the book lament about the world:

"A dream the world then seemed to me,
the fiction of a God,
colored smoke before the eyes
of a *discontented deity*."

"This world, eternally imperfect,
the image of an eternal contradiction
and an imperfect image thereof
— the drunken joy of an *imperfect creator*. —
thus the world once seemed to me."²

² Friedrich Nietzsche; Original Thinkers Institute (2022). *The Complete Works of Nietzsche: including Thus Spake Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, Human All Too Human, The Birth of Tragedy, and many more*. Kindle Edition.

In his famous interview with a Christian clergy, Stephen Fry, the famous British actor, once called God a ‘monster’ because God had done nothing to stop cancer in children. “How dare you?” he imaginatively told God, “How dare you create a world to which there is such misery that is not our fault. It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain.”

But, perhaps, instead of labelling these people as those who are hostile towards Christian faith (which most likely is true as well); perhaps, it is more helpful to see these people as those who are simply expressing their laments; those whose expectation of God and the world somehow did not match the reality they saw.

Yet, their disappointment may actually reveal, deep inside, their own longing for Divine truth. They were looking for the true face of God because what they had learned about God could not be reconciled with what they experienced.

So, before we pass judgement on people like Friederich Nietzsche and Stephen Fry, Jesus’ parable—about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Gospel of Luke—stands as a warning for us who like to think of ourselves as better than those people.

The Pharisee, in Jesus’ parable, does everything that one would expect from a devout person: he prays, he tithes, he fasts. He stands at the center of the Jewish religious tradition. The Tax Collector, on the other hand, stands on the margin. He doesn’t even dare to look at heaven.

Yet, Jesus says that it is the Tax Collector—the one who struggles to live up to the expectations of his faith tradition—who comes home justified, not the Pharisee who thinks that his standing before God is impeccable.

The parable reminds us, who stands in the center of our own faith, to not look down on those who are on the margin of faith; those who question God and life; those who 'wrestle' with God, just like Jacob in our reading last week.³

So, instead of us being defensive and attacking them, perhaps we should listen to their and our own lament with an open heart. After all, God listens to Jeremiah's laments and does not rebuke him for the harsh words that he uses to describe God. Perhaps, when we allow others and ourselves to air such lament, we too will find a deeper understanding of the nature of the Divine in our life and in the world.

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Which one is your preference: expressing your disappointment openly or keeping it to yourself?
2. How do you respond to someone who is expressing his/her anger or disappointment towards you?
3. Do you think it is ok for us or others to be angry with God and to express that anger towards God? Why?
4. How do you respond to the question: "How can a good God creates a world that is full pain and misery and evil?"
5. How would you respond to someone who expresses bitter disappointment to God? to the Church?

³ Genesis 32-22-31.