

Lent Group 2 – A Sorrowful Journey

Welcome everyone – back or first time. Not an easy theme – from Sunday's sermon – pick up your cross and follow; being a disciple when confused and uncertain. Build on that – have in mind personal situation - when we have discussion feel no pressure to say anything that you are not comfortable about and all agree what we say here stays here. Also – think as Miri encouraged us about wider context – Israel/Gaza in mind or other places and situations and challenges. Our time together – mixture of reflection and discussion. Good to have a Bible handy.

Begin with thinking time – on our own – knowing ourselves – Miri described herself as a doer; Anna sometimes tells me to restrain my instinct to 'fix it'.

What do you do... when you can't do anything?

After few moments – say prayer together.

Chose picture from Sinai desert – any guesses why? No path and there doesn't seem any way through mountains in front.

Many of us will not have experienced the desert. Has anyone? Anna and I – sabbatical – California – Joshua Tree (U2) – trail and if we went off – dead. If we live in cities, we may have a romanticised ideal of what living out in the wilderness might involve. But in Bible times there was no such misapprehension. Not only were deserts lacking in food and water, but these were not the only dangers, as Tom Wright also explains:

Slide 5 – and read

For all these reasons, the wilderness was feared. For people in Bible times it represented the unknown, danger, failure and mortality. Today we are not good at talking about, or reflecting on, these kinds of difficult issues. We all experience struggles, fears, doubts, disappointments, anger and hurt. All of us will at some point be faced with the mortality of ourselves and our loved ones. And yet so often we brush these thoughts under the carpet. British people will often do their best to keep a “stiff upper lip”, to “keep calm and carry on”. Even with God, we can come into church or to times of prayer, and try to pretend that everything is okay. Would God want to hear about our struggles? Can we be honest with him and honest with ourselves?

Slide 6 – discussion – no pressure but sometimes it can be helpful to name the fear

Come back together – fears – personal, family, community, nation, international... - careful with naming too many – come to church with four fears and go home with 54!

Read Exodus 3: 1-10 – maybe twice with pause between.

Wilderness experiences in the Bible teach us that God does hear. He does care. In Exodus 3, Moses is hiding in the desert when he hears God say: **Slide 7**

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.” (Exodus 3:7)

Our God is not blind to our struggles or deaf to our cries. He does not consider it a lack of faith, an insult, or a sin if we choose to be honest with him. We can tell him about our doubts, how we feel about the state of the world, or even share when we feel disappointed with him. In fact, he wants his people to cry out to him in honesty and desperation. The Psalms are full of honest, raw complaint,

sorrow and protest. Bible characters - from Hagar to David, from Jesus to Paul, pray heartfelt prayers of distress. These prayers are called "lament".

Songwriter Michael Card describes the importance of the wilderness in teaching us to lament: **Slide 8** – quite a difficult quote.

Slide 9 – pick up last sentence – discuss what this means and relate it to your experience and Moses' experience in Exodus 3 – what rings bells for you?

Slide 10 – John 11: 20-36 – read through twice.

Lament will look different for each one of us. Some people will come and whisper a prayer. Others might shout at God. Some of us will sing a sad song, others might paint a canvas of our pain. Some of us will shake our fists, others will ask questions to try to understand.

Explain context – Lazarus dies and Jesus delays – comes – two sisters meet him. Look at passage – not just at words but look for tone – you can say the same words in different ways!

Discussion –

Responses – Mary the introvert and Martha the extrovert – maybe?

The story of Moses demonstrates another of God's reactions to sorrowful circumstances. Moses isn't mourning a death - his issue is the mistreatment of his people under the Egyptians. But he is also consumed with self-doubt at the mistake he has already made in trying to sort this situation out. God comes to Moses to tell him that he cares, he heals, and that at he is calling Moses to do something about it.

So if you are like Martha, wilderness worship is a place for you to be honest with God. To tell him how you feel, to ask him questions, to call out "how long, O Lord?" All of these things are okay with him, and he will meet you in your honesty.

Wilderness worship is also a place to weep, to just let it all out like Mary did. That is okay with God too. Jesus stands and weeps with you.

And, thirdly, wilderness worship might be a place where God shows you his heart for a situation, as he did with Moses. God may move you for an injustice or a need or a person. It may be that he impresses his sorrow for something on your heart, and then he sends you to go and do something about it, in his power.

Each time – he meets us.

Slides 14-17 – with prayer – with eyes open maybe if you find picture on screen helpful...

Slide 14 – together

We pray for those who feel forgotten and unseen,
may they know that you remember them and see them, Lord.
We pray for those held hostage in Gaza,
we pray for those who are besieged and fearful in Gaza.
We pray for those you have laid on our hearts, Lord.
Help us to partner with you to remember the forgotten.
Search our hearts to reveal those we hide our faces from,
the outcast, the stranger or the homeless.

Change our hearts that we may turn our faces
towards these people and see them as your beloved children.

Slide 15 – together

We pray for those we know who struggle with mental illness,
anxiety and depression We pray that there will be resources released
to help, enough staff employed and finances given towards mental
health services nationally and locally. Help us to be a friend and a listening
ear to those who suffer. Fill us with compassion and wisdom.
Ultimately we pray for those who wrestle with sorrow, that they may know
your victory over those dark thoughts which currently seem to triumph.

Slide 16 – together

We pray for those who might be considered fallen by those around them;
may they know your restoration and grace.
Help us not to judge or exclude your beloved children,
but instead lift them up in prayer,
and embrace them with the love and grace we know in Christ.
Thank you, loving Father God, for hearing our prayer.
We exclaim together:

Slide 17 – together

Thanks to everyone; notices? Next week – Nicki leads us to be simple...?

Slide 18 – closing prayer