

Sermon – 27th June 2021: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

This sermon is the third in a series about David, who was to become the second King of Israel, after Saul. In the first week of this series Hamish preached about David's **humble and contrite** heart, and last week he spoke about David's **brave heart**. Today we think about David's **broken heart** because the poem that forms the Old Testament reading for this Sunday expresses David's deep grief over the death over Saul and Saul's son, David's dear friend Jonathan.

Today we will focus on two aspects of this reading. First, we will look at David's poem as a "public lament". And secondly we will look at what we can learn from David's "broken heart" – and from Christian writers too – about bringing our griefs and losses to God.

Public lament

This lament is apparently "a masterpiece of early Hebrew poetry," noted Stanley Gevirtz (1963).

Robert Gehrke (1968) wrote that it "has rightly been considered one of the finest pieces of literature of all time."

Walter Brueggemann (1990) described it as "powerful, passionate poetry..."

Being an ex-English-teacher I am interested in these comments about David's lament as a piece of literature, and some of you may be too.

Figures of speech in it include (but are not limited to):

- **the apostrophe** (turning aside to address someone as if he or she is there), as in David's command given to the imaginary Philistine messengers (1:20) and in his words addressed to Jonathan (1:26);
- **personification** (representing some thing or idea as a person), as in David's speaking to the Gilboa mountain range as if it has ears (1:2);
- **merismus** (mentioning the extremes of something to express a totality), as in "no dew or rain" (1:21), meaning that *all* moisture was banned from Mount Gilboa, site of the royal deaths;
- **similes** as in David's saying that Saul and Jonathan "were swifter than eagles [and] stronger than lions" (1:23);
- **synecdoche** (where a part stands for the whole of something), as in the references to Saul's "shield" (1:21) and the "weapons of war" (1:27), which stand, respectively, for the fallen king and for the royal pair (and perhaps, in a wider sense, for all those who had sacrificed their lives).
- **hyperbole** (exaggeration for effect), as in David's praising the unity of Saul and Jonathan (1:23); this hyperbole surely relies on selective memory.

We are told that David **instructed that this lament would be *taught to the people***. He wanted the people of Israel to remember the greatness of Saul and Jonathan. Given the rocky relationship he had with Saul, this is perhaps somewhat surprising, although it may also have helped pave the way to his own leadership as King – though fighting continued between the forces supporting Saul's family and those supporting David for some time.

What relevance can all this possibly have to us in 2021? How do we express our sense of sorrow or mark a significant change when a public figure dies or when a significant event occurs in our community? What occurred when Prince Philip died, for example?



After the death of Prince Philip, the Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, published **The Patriarchs - An Elegy** - a "commemorative piece that tries to say something about the generation he came from". Armitage told the *Daily Mail*: "I didn't know the duke, but there is the idea that he didn't like a fuss and hated sycophancy, and I didn't want the poem to be part of a chorus of sycophancy."

The video clip includes lovely images of Prince Philip and the poem is read by the poet himself:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/simon-armitage-prince-philip-poem-b1833030.html>

The Patriarchs – An Elegy

"The weather in the window this morning
is snow, unseasonal singular flakes,
a slow winter's final shiver. On such an occasion
to presume to eulogise one man is to pipe up
for a whole generation – that crew whose survival
was always the stuff of minor miracle,
who came ashore in orange-crate coracles,
fought ingenious wars, finagled triumphs at sea
with flaming decoy boats, and side-stepped torpedoes.

Husbands to duty, they unrolled their plans
across billiard tables and vehicle bonnets,
regrouped at breakfast. What their secrets were
was everyone's guess and nobody's business.
Great-grandfathers from birth, in time they became
both inner core and outer case
in a family heirloom of nesting dolls.
Like evidence of early man their boot-prints stand
in the hardened earth of rose-beds and borders.

They were sons of a zodiac out of sync
with the solar year, but turned their minds
to the day's big science and heavy questions.

To study their hands at rest was to picture maps
showing hachured valleys and indigo streams, schemes
of old campaigns and reconnaissance missions.
Last of the great avuncular magicians
they kept their best tricks for the grand finale:
Disproving Immortality and Disappearing Entirely.

The major oaks in the wood start tuning up
and skies to come will deliver their tributes.
But for now, a cold April's closing moments
parachute slowly home, so by mid-afternoon
snow is recast as seed heads and thistledown."

This poem marking the death of Prince Philip is not deeply personal – deliberately not so – unlike David's lament, which was not only public, not only shared with others, but was *also* deeply personal as he grieved for Saul (with whom he had a complex relationship) and Jonathan (whom he loved dearly).

Personal grief

In David's public lament there is a spirit of forgiveness. He is choosing to celebrate the good, not to remember the bad about Saul. David's conduct seems an anticipation of the Christian precept, not only to forgive, but to love your enemies. But I am pretty sure there would also have been some lingering angst for David as he grappled with the loss of someone with whom he had a difficult relationship.

We can be thankful that there are many examples of David's prayers in the Bible where he poured out his heart before God – which show us how David turned to God as he grappled with losses and with challenges of all sorts. These are commonly known as the Psalms of Lament. The Psalms of Lament are filled with questions. They are the questions of one who is weighed down by the sorrows of this world, by the fears, griefs, and heartaches that are common to human experience. But in these Psalms there is almost always a "but" – a turning point at which, after pouring out his heart to God, David (or other Psalm writers) experience consolation or begin to have a shifting perspective on the circumstances that are overwhelming. [Psalm 77:1-11 (and it goes on).]

So many of the Psalms (and traditional Presbyterian hymns which are based on them) are declarations of faith in God regardless of circumstances – that God is a refuge and source of strength and comfort.

CS Lewis: in 1961 published this wee book, "A Grief Observed." In it he turns to God with great honesty, at a time of great sorrow, his wife having died after only four years of marriage. Being a wordsmith, Lewis attempts to work out his grief after the death of his wife by writing about it. He describes his anguish and his confusion and his anger and his struggle with faith. The book moves from real distress to a point of greater calm and acceptance.

- “Tell me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.” (23)
- “When I lay all these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of ‘no answer’. It is not the locked door, It is more like a silent, certainly no uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook his head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like. ‘Peace, child; you don’t understand.’ Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask – half our great theological and mystical problems are like that.” (Page 58-59).

Despite CS Lewis’ earlier comment, I do want to conclude by saying two things about the “consolations of religion” – something about the comfort and hope of Christian faith.

First: As we heard in Jesus’ words from our second Bible reading today, we are promised that those who mourn will be **comforted**. When we grieve we are likely to receive comfort from family and friends – others who may weep with us, acknowledge the importance of our loss, and help us in many practical ways. As Christians, we also receive the comfort of others in our church family in times of loss. We can also find comfort in trusting that there is One who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

Second: A “consolation of religion” is that faith in the resurrection of Jesus offers us **hope**. 1 Thessalonians 4:13: “Brothers (and sisters), we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Death is not the end. We have what is described in 1 Peter as a “living hope” through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

**God of love and mercy,
embrace all those
whose hearts today
overflow with grief,
unanswered questions
or a sense of loss.
Grant them space
to express their tears.**

**Hold them close
through the coming days.**