

The Church as Lazarus – Following Jesus in the Emotional Landscape

Discipleship is not an academic exercise. It is often, substantially, a journey through an emotional landscape. Sometimes those emotions are negative and dark: grief, suffering, pain.



This shouldn't surprise us. After all, to "abide in Christ", is to be *his*. To *follow* him is to live as Jesus did (1 John 2:6) and Jesus was, and is, and was prophesied to be a "man of suffering and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3). Discipleship is about "sharing in his sufferings" (Romans 8:17). There is a *cost* to discipleship, as Bonhoeffer (amongst many others) would say.

I'm not trying to be morose. There is joy, peace, fulfilment, *happiness* even, on the road with Jesus. Laughter abounds. But these are not grounded in some sort of avoidance or escape, but are comingled, intertwined, with all that comes. The joy breaks out from the grief. The tears are wiped away. The peace is beyond understanding. Glory sprouts from the suffering.

A part of my emotional landscape recently has been grief. I have *grieved* this week for some reason. I was confronting myself. I was encountering some of those pains, regrets, fears, and worries that get pushed down until they pop up like fungi in the damp of one's hidden soul.

I was also grieving for the church. This has been a week in which the ugly side of us has been on display, for various reasons. The human sexuality “debate” has yet again be broached. I have had over twenty years of experiencing this particular no man’s land, and yet the vitriol, bile, and lip-curling condescension has shaken me. But my reflection hasn’t really been about #LLF (for those who know what I’m referring to); it’s a more general weariness. We love the church (local and large), and that involves care and belief. Yet the church often looks more like a phlegm-hacking pale-skinned shadow than the vivified vocational verve of the gospel we follow. Amidst self-referential ear-tickling comfort-mongering machinations I have also seen my own disintegrating compromises, conflicting responsibilities, and sheer plain finitude. For better or for worse, realistically or otherwise, that has been my recent emotional landscape.

So where is Jesus on that path? I’ve been finding him in a play of two parts:

The first part is an insight from my wife, Gill. This is not a surprise; she is regularly insightful. She took me to **the story of Lazarus**, who Jesus raised from the dead, in John 11:1-44.

The story may be familiar to you. Jesus is friends with Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. While some distance away from them he learns that Lazarus is sick. He declares a hope that “this will not end in death” but it will “be for God’s glory” and his own. He delays his return. Lazarus dies. “Lazarus has fallen asleep; I am going to wake him up”, he says, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” There is hope; but Lazarus is dead.

Martha comes out to meet him. She presents a rational, theological engagement to Jesus. When Jesus assures her that Lazarus will be raised, she pushes that hope off into an

abstract future: "Yes, I believe that we will all rise again."
Lazarus is dead, Jesus, but we get the theory.

Mary has not come to greet Jesus, but he sends for her. Mary readily emotes. She collapses at his feet, and there is a tinge of bitterness to her voice: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's only half a step from "Where the hell have you been! I thought we could trust you! I thought you brought hope!" Lazarus is dead, Jesus, where have you been?

Martha grieves. Mary grieves. And, even though he knows what is going to happen, **Jesus wept too.**

Here's the insight in this story for me: We are grieving for the Western Church like Mary and Martha grieved for Lazarus. Good people have been plugging away at gospel ministry for years, the church has been cared for in its fitness and its brokenness, its strength and decline. We have done our best to be faithful to our task, but in the end, we know, that none of it matters, unless Jesus shows up.

Our gospel preaching is nothing, if Jesus is not in it. Our social action. Our pursuit of what is good and holy. Our cries for justice. Our restructuring. Even our self-giving to one another in unity and peace-making. All of these virtues are not enough, except if the Spirit of Jesus be in them. There are times when we look at ourselves, locally, nationally, within our Western world and there is deathliness about us. And we *feel* the bitter tears. In that landscape, the blurted out "prayer" of the most visceral sort is: "Lord, when are you going to show up? Lord, why are you waiting? We can't change hearts. We can't overcome the power of sin. But you can! Where have you been?" We struggle to even pray "Revive us, Oh Lord" except in Martha-like abstract theory.

The church is Lazarus. And we are allowed to grieve. Yes, there is hope in this analogy, and we don't ignore it:

Lazarus is called back to life, away from the stench of death; a living reflection of Ezekiel 37. Jesus is glorified, and his people believe. And now, Jesus *will* be glorified, life will come. Yes there is hope. But let's not rush quickly there. Right now can be a time for weeping.

The church is Lazarus. And *Jesus* weeps. And that's OK.

It brings me to the second part. I have tried to imagine Jesus weeping: tears rolling down middle-eastern skin, cheeks and beard. Were they gentle tears? Or sobbing? Were they sympathetic tears for Mary, or tears of his own response, akin to the woundedness he cried over rebellious Jerusalem (Luke 19:41)?

My task as a disciple of Jesus is to follow him. How then, may I be led by his emotions? What would I learn if I could watch his passions, see his tears, and hear the prayers he whispers through salt-dripped lips? What may I glean from his demeanour when he encounters stress, grief, injustice, and utter weariness? Where can I go to *learn* from him, and be his disciple?

The gospels are good place to start. But the Scriptures also give us a fulsome emotional repertoire: the Book of Psalms.

Let me get there somewhat theologically: Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed heir of the messianic king David. David points to Jesus. The psalms of David are the prayers of David. They are the prayers of a messiah. Prophetically, therefore, they are the prayers of *Jesus*. The New Testament often uses the psalms this way. Take a look at Hebrews 1:5, quoting Psalm 2:7 – “You are my Son, today I have become your Father.” Keep reading that Psalm and on the lips of David it is somewhat pretentious, but on the lips of Jesus it is simply, right: “I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”

So now I can read the psalms, and hear them on the lips of

Jesus in the emotional landscape. In the psalms is faith-filled joy, faith-filled peace, faith-filled anger, faith-filled weariness, faith-filled grief. In the psalms, the Spirit of Jesus is praying, and I can *learn* from what is prayed.

I can see Jesus expressing gentle but firm defiance against political power in Psalm 2:1-3: *"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break the chains,' they say, 'and throw off the fetters'"*

I can see Jesus putting faith against fear in Psalm 3:1-3. I wonder if these were amongst his groanings in Gethsemane?: *"O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!... But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."*

I can see the protective frustration of Jesus in Psalm 4:2-3: *"How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him."*

I can hear the weariness of Jesus and a sinking into his Father's arms in Psalm 5:1-2: *"Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray."* I wonder if these were in his laying-awake, or his mornings when he sought solitude with his Father.

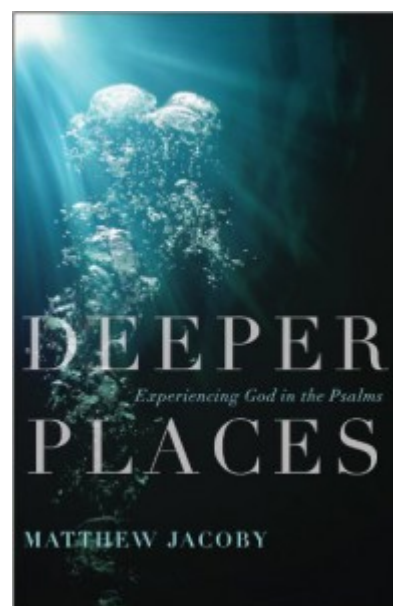
In some psalms I think we see the prayers of Jesus on behalf of his people; the Spirit gives voice to the collective, broken, Body of Christ: *"O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline in your wrath... My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?"* (Psalm 6:1-3). Is this a glimpse of Christ's intercessions for us before his father (Romans 8:34)?

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1) and I hear my Saviour's delight.

Right now, anyone who cares for the Lord, and for his people, is likely passing through an emotional landscape. Here, as ever, the Lord weeps too. Here, as ever, Jesus teaches us his way.

Photo by Joshua Earle on Unsplash

Review: Deeper Places



Gill and I are long time fans of the Australian Christian musical phenomenon that is *Sons of Korah*. Headed by Matthew Jacoby, the *Sons of Korah* project is to set the Old Testament psalms to music. Their philosophy is one of interpretation rather than *re-interpretation*; they provide a literal musical "translation" more than a paraphrase. The lyrics are often word-for-word of an English text. The composition makes heavy use of strings and multi-layered folk melodies to communicate not just the meaning, but the *feeling*, of the psalms. They

are both affective and effective.

It was a great delight, therefore, to have Matthew Jacoby's book *Deeper Places* thrust into my hands by Gill after she had eagerly devoured it herself.

Here Jacoby lays out not just his philosophy for approaching the psalms, but the philosophical imprints of the spirituality that he has learned from them. It is the essence of his doctoral studies and so this is no touchy-feely pop-psych pseudo-tract; it is a deeply applicable theological treatise. It has fed my soul, expanded my mind, deepened my homiletics, because it has drawn me to the Word of God and the words of God's people.

For Jacoby the psalms express an holistic spiritual journey. The ultimate end is to instil "rightly oriented desire" (p68) in the hearers/readers/singers. It is no accident that the "chief end of man" is quoted towards the end of the book as he explores themes of *enjoyment* and praise.

At the highest point of the spiritual journey portrayed by the Psalter, we find people enjoying God. In their enjoyment of God, they become vessels of praise to God. This deeper sense of praise is precisely what is meant to "glorify." We can praise God in a shallower sense with words alone, but we can only glorify God by enjoying him. (p161)

But, as they say, it's the journey that counts. The psalms are *not* just about praise and glory, they are also full of query, doubt, tension, and raw lament. It is in the consideration of these aspects that Jacoby's commentary is of the greatest value.

Jacoby locates the beginning of the praise-bound journey not in victory but in the raw brokenness of this world.

From our perspectives, they [the psalms] express the desire

to feel loved, to be affirmed and validated, to feel secure, and so forth. This earthly spirituality, as I have called it, is also seen in the psalms in the ample expression they give to the complications of our human dysfunction. Human dysfunction does not guide these expressions, but our dysfunction does cause a constant tension in our relationship with God that must be brought to the surface with honest communication, as it must be in any relationship. This is what we see in the psalms. (p26)

In his definitive metaphor God is imaged as an ocean in which we are suspended. The human dysfunction is a shell that not only insulates us from the divine, but propels us upwards to the shallows like a bobbing submarine. In contrast, the journey of the psalms is ever deeper, and necessarily a journey of tension; the lament of human hurt mixes with the life-filled promises of God until the shell bursts and we are consumed inwardly and outwardly by God's presence, which we therefore glorify.

"...the psalmists deliberately bring two things into tension. They deliberately highlight the reality of their situation as it stands in tension with the reality of God and his promises. As both realities are amplified, this very tension then becomes the seedbed for faith and hope. Faith is conceived by the injection of the divine promise into the open wound of a heart that has allowed itself to be wounded by reality." (p86)

I have long rejected the association of "spiritual" with "ethereal." To be spiritual is to go deep, into gut-level issues. And spiritual work is work that (often painfully) adjusts our foundations, or is so rooted upon our foundations that the depths of our soul is welled up and out. Jacoby threads this notion through the Psalter, revealing it's nature not just as a song-book but as an exercise-book for life.

Like his songs, Jacoby has taken what already exists and has brought it to life in lively language that I for one will be referencing again and again. He has done the preacher's task in an extraordinary way. In the very best sense he has opened the Word of God.

Q&A: Having just looked up Psalm 149.3 I came upon this... What do you make of it and what is your opinion?

Anonymous asks: *Having just looked up Psalm 149.3 I came upon this item*
(<http://www.freedomministries.org.uk/masters/idiom11c.shtml>)
What do you make of it and what is your opinion?

OK. Psalm 149.3 in the ESV is this:

*Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.*

On the face of it, the psalm looks like a reasonably ordinary song of praise. The simple phrase *Praise the LORD!* in the first verse echoes the very clear sentiments of the very next psalm (150) – *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!* Psalm 150 seems to be a simple call to exalting God “for his mighty deeds.. his excellent greatness” (v2) and, like Psalm 149:3 calls us to “Praise him with

tambourine and dance" (v4). The two psalms seem to go together.

The link that Anonymous references is to an organisation started by one Andrew Dobbin with the following agenda, taken from the sites *About Us* page,

Freedom Ministries was started in 1990 by Andrew Dobbin who at that time was living in Bushmills, N.Ireland.

He began to be concerned about the "infiltration" of pop-idiom music and other forms of entertainment into the Church, things which by their very nature tend to entertain rather than teach and edify.

The application of this to the psalms is made by Peter Masters (from the referenced page)

Some psalms refer to musical instruments which were not normally associated with worship at all, either in the Temple on feast days, or for accompanying psalms and spiritual songs. These other instruments were played on festive occasions and for enjoyment and recreation.

It is failure to identify these 'civil life' references that causes people to think that the Psalms condone a musical jamboree policy for worship.

With reference to Psalm 82, Dr. Masters continues:

The formula is the same as ever:- tambourines for national festivities and cultural dance, harp-like instruments for psalm-singing, and trumpets and cymbals used exclusively in the Temple orchestra under careful restraint for the sacrifices connected with these feasts.

And with reference to Psalm 149:3 he writes:

Psalm 149.3 is also quoted in support of today's pop-music activities, and is said to condone dancing in worship...

However, the question must be asked, is the psalmist speaking about acts of direct spiritual worship, or is he speaking about the cultural, recreational life of the nation? As we read through the psalm the answer becomes obvious.

The implication is that dancing and tambourines have no place in "direct worship" of the Christian kind.

This is classic overcategorisation derived from legalism. Let me point out

1. What on earth is "direct worship"? Can worship ever be "indirect"? Something is either worshipful or it is not! There's a false dichotomy here.
2. This false dichotomy arises, it seems, from a correlation of "direct worship" with OT "temple worship." This implies an equating of direct Christian worship with OT temple worship which is simply not the case. This fails to take into account not only the significant unfoldings in the covenantal life of God's people from OT to NT it also simply an overrestriction of something general ("worship") into something very very particular (the temple).
3. And finally, what on earth is wrong with "entertainment"? Yes, for sure, there is an inconsistency between facile or vapid entertainment that does nothing but amuse, and true expression of worship. But God is a God of experience and expression – and worship rightly includes the entertainment of all our senses and the catching up of our whole being in bringing glory to God.

So pick up your tambourine and guitar (or pipe organ! – the beauty of which I am coming to appreciate despite the fact that you can't pick it up!) and dance before the Lord. Let our

whole being and all that we are praise his holy name.

Amen.