

Many people say that, if God loves us, how can he allow so much suffering? As a Christian, it's something I have thought about but not been able to find the right words to answer any enquiry of that sort. As a lay minister, it's something I ought to be able to talk about!

Lay ministers can receive a magazine called Transforming Ministry (formerly The Reader) which gives us many informative articles about all sorts of subjects. I was recently catching up on some back issues and came across an article called "God's creation and our fragility within it" by David Kibble, retired headmaster and Reader in Leeds.

He begins with a discussion about how much of God we can see in his Creation and ends with a passage about the threat of climate change. But it's the middle section about coronavirus which caught my eye.

Part of what he says is:

"If God created the universe and has enabled us to see something of him in his creation, what can we say about coronavirus? There are some who say that the virus is a punishment from God designed to make us return to him. Others suggest that it is not a punishment but something allowed by God, again to encourage us to return to him. N.T. Wright (*see below*) suggests that our faith is not able to provide 'answers'; Christianity is not there to 'explain'. Instead, he argues, we should follow the biblical tradition of lament rather than the rationalist tradition of looking for answers."

N.T. Wright, also known as Tom Wright, is a prolific writer, bishop and academic. I usually go to his series of "for Everyone" books when I start thinking about a sermon. I don't agree with all he writes but he makes a very good starting point. So, when he is quoted I take notice.

I'm not very good at lament. I'm a "glass half full" sort of person and lament somehow doesn't fit into that half of a glass! However, you will also probably be aware that I'm very keen on the Psalms and a number of them are called "Psalms of Lament" and so it's an idea I've had to wrestle with before.

If you search the web for Psalms of Lament, you will find a lot of suggestions for further reading. I hadn't realised that there are so many Psalms of Lament and of course it is a major theme of the Old Testament. To lament is

to express deep sorrow, grief, or regret. The psalms of lament are beautiful poems or hymns expressing human struggles and are prayers that lay out a troubling situation to the Lord and make a request for his help.

You might like to look at Psalm 12 which is an example of a community lament, expressing sadness over widespread sin. Or you could look at Psalm 86 which is in David's voice lamenting over how his foes are trying to kill him. Or try Psalm 13 – a short psalm to start with (Good News Translation):

How much longer will you forget me, Lord? Forever?

How much longer will you hide yourself from me?

² How long must I endure trouble?

How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?

How long will my enemies triumph over me?

³ Look at me, O Lord my God, and answer me.

Restore my strength; don't let me die.

⁴ Don't let my enemies say, "We have defeated him."

Don't let them gloat over my downfall.

⁵ I rely on your constant love;

I will be glad, because you will rescue me.

⁶ I will sing to you, O Lord,

because you have been good to me.

I don't think I've quite worked out how I might answer a question about why God allows coronavirus and other sorrows, but I think this is worth thinking about to see if I can find a form of words which I can use with confidence. I hope you might find this useful too. Amen.