

Feeling Depressed and Following Jesus

A sermon on Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 September 2019

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Message

Facing an epidemic of depression and despair, Jesus calls us to follow on a tear-stained path of prophetic faithfulness.

Sermon

After the huge school-strike climate action rally in the city on Friday, I rang a friend of mine to let him know how it went. I knew he hadn't been there, but that he would have if he could. He's been involved in environmental activism for a long time, and was even included in the Queen's Birthday honours list this year for his work on water safety. But he couldn't be there because multiple sclerosis has robbed him of so many of his physical faculties that he lives in a full time care facility and is no longer able to get out and about easily.

He's about my age, and I've known him since he was fit, healthy and active, before the MS began its attack. It's been years now, but watching it happen to a mate, it has felt horribly rapid. And I couldn't help thinking as I spoke to him about the rally that somehow, what had happened to him seemed like a bit of a metaphor of the climate change threat. If major global action doesn't happen very quickly, the crippling of the planet could be almost as quick and as severe as what has happened to his body.

Then I read again the first reading for tonight, the one from the prophet Jeremiah, and I was struck by a further connection to my friend's story.

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there not a doctor in the house?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?
O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the suffering of my poor people!

The prophet Jeremiah spoke these words more than two and a half thousand years ago, but as we saw last week, his words can sound startlingly relevant to our world today. Alongside the various medications my friend takes for his crippling physical illness, he is also now taking anti-depressants. It would be surprising if he wasn't. Faced with what MS has done to him and will continue to do to him, that cry of despair from the prophet could well be his cry. Why wouldn't he be depressed?

But the causes of despair and depression are not always so obvious, and there seems to be a lot of it going around. Some people are talking about an epidemic of depression. It's been prominent in the news in this town in the past fortnight after the depression-related death of football personality, Danny Frawley. I'm a St Kilda supporter, and 30 years ago I was often in

the crowd cheering him on. To the casual observer, he had a very happy and successful life, but depression killed him.

Another of my friends is a school teacher, and he tells me that two of his year 12 students are on suicide watch this week.

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It's hard to know whether there is really more depression around today or not. It feels like it, but it's hard to know. Maybe in days gone by, we just didn't recognise it because we didn't know what it was, especially when it had no obvious external trigger, when it was an inexplicable chemical imbalance in the brain. Though we probably didn't understand it enough to recognise what it was when the causes were more obvious either. Most of the soldiers who made it home from the horrors of the first world war suffered symptoms that would have led to a diagnosis nowadays. There's a [story in today's paper about the similar mental health catastrophe among those coming home from the war in Afghanistan](#). Perhaps the fact that it is recognised now points to the lack of understanding in the past. So maybe there's always been a lot of it, but it feels like it is becoming more and more prevalent.

And a bit like watching my friend with his MS-related depression, it doesn't seem that surprising. As Kasey Chambers once said in one of her songs, "If you're not pissed off with the world, you're just not paying attention." There were quite a few placards at the rally on Friday with variations on that thought. It seems entirely plausible that climate change fears would be leading to increased rates of depression. Another of my friends questioned that on the grounds that back in the 80's we were pretty worried about the prospect of a nuclear holocaust. Why would this be so different? Maybe he's right, but I wonder whether back then we assumed that the end would at least be quick and painless, and that didn't seem nearly as bad as imagining our kids suffocating and starving on an increasingly uninhabitable planet. There was another [report in today's paper about growing numbers of couples abandoning their dream of having children](#) for this exact reason.

My friend's alternative theory is that toxic social media is the biggest factor in the increase of depression, especially among his students. I suspect that it's both-and. Social media has certainly created a new, seemingly inescapable means of making people feel painfully inadequate in comparison to the public images presented by their air-brushed peers. It even puts numbers on your relative value with likes and followers.

Actually, it's not just social media, but media more generally that contributes. Horrendous wars, crimes and disasters have always happened, but in the not too distant past, we only heard about them if they were nearby. With today's communications technology, we can find ourselves unable to escape the misery of tragedies in places we've never even heard of.

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When I disappeared into the desert on retreat in January, one of the really big questions that I was grappling with was “what does it mean to be a preacher and pastor in a world that seems to be plunging into apocalypse?” And to put the more personal edge on it, “what does it mean to be a preacher and pastor in a world that seems to be plunging into apocalypse when I am no longer deluded enough to think that my preaching is making a real contribution to turning around that slide into apocalypse?”

For me, that question had obvious career implications, but even without that aspect, it is a burning question about what it means to follow Jesus in today’s world. Maybe you feel the weight of this question too. “What does following Jesus mean in a world that seems to be plunging into apocalypse?” What does it mean, especially when you are no longer falling for either the delusion that you can save the world through the strength of your own faith and activism, or the delusion that Jesus out-performs any known anti-depressant and so Christians can be all happy and cheerful and free of all anxieties about the future?

I didn’t emerge from my desert retreat with it all worked out and a neatly packaged answer. Sorry about that! But I did emerge with some changes of perspective and some new strength to carry on. Central to that change was encountering Jesus in one of the moments when he sounded most like what we heard from the prophet Jeremiah tonight.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! And now, see, all is lost. You are left desolate.” (Matthew 23:37-38)

As I meditated prayerfully on those tear-stained words of Jesus, I saw more and more that we are not following one who felt assured that he could fix everything. Like today’s climate scientists talking to politicians, he may have known exactly what was needed to turn things around, but he was under no illusion that everyone would drop everything and buy in with enthusiasm and a willingness to pay the price of change.

So my friends, if you are here because you were told that following Jesus would solve all your worries and make your life happy ever after, I’m sorry, but you were lied to. If you just keep running away from the pain and hiding in some happy la-la land, smiling and waving your hands and saying “Praise the Lord and turn off the news,” don’t expect to find yourself in the company of Jesus there.

Jesus, like Jeremiah before him, was an anguished prophet who calls us to follow him on a pathway of tears, a pathway that leads to rejection and death by crucifixion. I’d be tempted to say that you follow at your own peril if it wasn’t for the reality that the peril of not following is every bit as apocalyptic and depressing and even less meaningful. But it’s there, in the places of heartbreak and hopelessness and despair that you are far more likely to find Jesus walking at your side with a loving arm around your shoulders.

This morning I received an email from a fellow preacher in the USA who had just read the first draft of this sermon. In the past year, three close family members had died, and he had to move his wife, who is suffering dementia, into a nursing home. He also had to move house himself, and in the midst of it all, he broke his leg. He has every reason to feel depressed and despairing. He wrote, “your sermon helped me to cry some more. I believe that’s a good thing. I want to thank you for how the scriptures and your words have spoken to my heart.”

Clearly, he gets it. He’s not trying to numb the pain behind a plastic smile and meaningless platitudes about everything’s wonderful because God is in control.

From Jeremiah to Jesus and on through some of the early desert monastic saints, we follow a trail of tears that doesn’t seek to escape from the sorrow of a world hell-bent on destruction, but which does seek to flee from being drawn into the system and becoming part of the problem. We follow Jesus on a trail of tears that does not avoid the pain of lament, but responds by living out a courageous prophetic faithfulness to the vision of life as it should be, full of love and compassion and beauty.

That faithfulness begins right here as we gather each week around the Word and Table, standing shoulder to shoulder with our crucified and risen Lord. We don’t shy away from the grief and despair that is so raw and real in the Word, and we don’t shy away from the brokenness and bloodshed that are encountered at this table. And by facing them squarely and prayerfully, instead of trying to numb them out with the hypnotic distractions of social media hits and reality television and prescription medications or alcohol; by facing them squarely and prayerfully, and feeding on them with Jesus, we are nourished for the journey with a taste of the first fruits of a new world of love and hope. And though that taste will not eliminate the sorrow or immunise you against all depression and despair, it will strengthen you to keep putting one foot after the other into the footsteps of Jesus, and those footsteps, far from coming to a dead end at the cross, continue right on out the door of the open tomb, beckoning us to follow still as they dance on into a new life of love and hope fulfilled.