

An Invitation to Hope: Mission through Prayer and Lament by Fleur Dorrell.



Translations
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Some seasons are better than others, and with a third lockdown and no end in sight, it's hard not to be anxious. We are living on a wing and a prayer.

Yet the first thing that strikes me is that the Scriptures know what we're going through. How many times in the Bible does it tell us that we do not know what tomorrow will bring, we do not know when Jesus will return, that we must be rooted in faith: in things unseen as well as seen. That we should discern the signs of the times, recognise the true prophets, seek the face of Christ in everyone we meet? Not to lay up treasures on earth that will rust in heaven, or make too many grand plans. We're invited to look to the heart of things, be prepared to lose our life for others, and care for the poor and sick. To live and love - one day at a time.

Our artist Paul Martin has created a painting called *Translations* which reflects how themes from the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New. It is helpful to be reminded of this as we hold onto hope right now. Here we see Christ, the Word, clothed with the word, blesses us with the words of his Father. The old Adam becomes Christ; Eve becomes the church; Babel is redeemed as Pentecostal tongues of fire (12 firebirds flying from an upper room); the fig

tree which was in the garden of paradise becomes the fig tree withered by Christ for failing to bear its proper fruit; Balaam's ass, which warned the foolish prophet, becomes the ass's colt of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All of these people are responding to the Lord in their own time, from their own experience. They are hearing but not speaking because listening to God is how we find the way forward.

Eve wears a coat with a snake on the back. A child who turns to look at us cuts the reptile off with large scissors whilst a firebird hovers over his head. Adam, who is naked, is being "dressed" by a man offering him a robe of righteousness embroidered with the words "phos" and "light". He is holding a picture of a fig tree. Christ the word is in the centre of the picture clothed in a seamless robe embroidered with letters making up the word "logos" in different languages. He is holding a testament and blessing us.

What we are living through today is *exactly* what the Bible has prepared us for, so why is it such a surprise when it does just that? If we look at how much of the Bible is based on living with uncertainty, suffering and death, coupled with ranting at God, seeking direction in anguish and doubt, pleading for signs and solutions, then all the clues we need to navigate this pandemic are there. The Emmaus disciples wouldn't have been so shocked to see that it was Jesus breaking the bread if they'd been listening to him before the start of their journey. We have the entire Bible to give us the light we need. But that light is not a torch, it is light based on living with mystery, living without control or resolution, living with unanswered questions, with pain and paradox. All of which require our flexibility, resilience, and trust in the absolute power of God to get us to the other side. The idea that our faith is full of certainties is deeply flawed. The only certainty we have is that God is with us. And that God is good with anger. He's fine about our raging at him, demanding answers, weeping and screaming with despair.

Just look at the Psalms –

Psalm 22 – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
(*cf. Jesus on the Cross in Mark 15: 34*)

Psalm 71 – Do not cast me away when I am old,
do not forsake me when my strength is gone.

Psalm 77 – I cry aloud to God, that he may hear me...
Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his
compassion?"

Psalm 88 – O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

The book of Lamentations is called that for a very good reason:

Up, cry out in the night-time,
in the early hours of darkness;
pour your heart out like water
before Yahweh.

Stretch out your hands to him
for the lives of your children.

Lamentations 2:19

A lament is not a question – it is a cry that wants to be heard. And God hears it even if nobody else does. If you've never read Job or Ecclesiasticus, then this pandemic is the time to get stuck in. The Bible is intrinsically informed by trauma. The biblical stories come out of the experience of people and communities who have gone through the most painful, violent experiences that life can throw at us. It was written against the backdrop of dysfunctional families, wars, enslavement, political power struggles, natural disasters, human trafficking, enforced migration, collective and individual oppression, religious persecution and the alleged abandonment by God among his chosen people. When non-believers say we don't need the Bible anymore because it's irrelevant – they couldn't be more misguided. The 10 O'clock news on most nights barely covers the Bible's canon of suffering. It also misses the Bible's ultimate hope for which Christ's coming prepared us for all along.

Hope isn't the conviction that our lives will turn out well if we work and pray hard, but the certainty that it makes sense regardless of how life turns out. Hope looks to the future but does not forget the past. In that hope, it will be grace that enables us to keep walking with Christ.