

Ingeborg Löwisch: Psalm 126 - Commemorating the dead during the lockdown 2020

Published in Athalya Brenner-Idan and Gale A. Yee, ed., *Psalms: My Psalm, My Context* (Texts @ Contexts), T&T Clark, February 2024

In the first days of the lockdown in spring 2020, my turn in the emergency pastoral care team brought me to a family in the outskirts of Hamburg. A boy had suffered a seizure in the tub and suffered oxygen deprivation. When I arrived, the ambulance had just left for the hospital with little hope for his life to be saved. A young relative stood in the door and provided disinfectant to the people who crowded in the hall and I admired his responsibility. Other relatives were about to leave for driving to the hospital. Of course, getting close, providing care and securing parents and siblings in the larger family net, was an evident thing to do. Only much later, when I was on my way back home, I realized, that none of them would be allowed to enter the hospital. If lucky, both parents would have been allowed to see their son.

I don't know what happened to the boy and his family. In the emergency care system other people take over. But in my own neighbourhood and parish located in the centre of Hamburg, similar situations occurred. They shed a light on the situation in hospitals during the lockdown. Patients were often alone and isolated. Relatives could not visit them or only one person was allowed to come. Larger family or friendship connections were interrupted and became partly dysfunctional. Friends and family were denied the opportunity to care for a loved one, to offer the solace of touch to the dying, to say good-bye. Numbers of participants were restricted at funerals. Funeral feasts and visits were suspended.

Experiencing the despair, anger and also inhumanness of pandemic death culture, our parish decided to perform the ritual of commemorating the dead on Eternity Sunday, even though services on site were still exceptional in Hamburg at this point of the pandemic. In the Protestant church in Germany, Eternity Sunday is celebrated at the end of November. At the last Sunday of the liturgical year before advent, we read out the names of the dead of the previous year and light candles for them. Performing an in-person ritual in November 2020 was meant to restore a sense of dignity, the comfort of participation and also normality in individual and social dealing with death, as well as to enable bereaved ones to enter a process of mourning. The service was extremely intense and concentrated. For a long time, I felt that it was the most

sensible and meaningful thing we did as parish in the lockdown – for the individual participants as well as for the neighbourhood and greater communities.

After this powerful experience, I wondered what made the service so important. Of course, the ritual of names and candles is always meaningful. Of course, providing the church room as public space in a situation in which people were so strongly thrown back on their selves, was revealing. Of course, the music was beautiful. But in the end, I felt, that reciting Psalm 126 made the difference. The ritual was strong in bestowing dignity unto the deceased and unto the bereaved. But the words of Psalm 126 opened an emotional space in which consolation was given.

Psalm 126 is an inherent part of the texts of Eternity Sunday. On the first view, this is due to Luther's translation, which comes as a view on eternal life: *Wenn der HERR die Gefangenen Zions erlösen wird, so werden wir sein wie die Träumenden* (v.1). In English, when the Lord will redeem the captivities of Zions, we shall be as dreamers. Indeed, Luther's phrasing is a beautiful way of expressing the longing for, as well as the promise of a future for both, the living and the dead. At the same time, Luther's translation fades the psalm's reference to a very particular past to the background. In contrast, the New Revised Standard Version translates *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream* – or alternatively *When the LORD brought back those who returned to Zion* (v.1) and thus particularly refers to the return from Babylonian exile. The Hebrew text allows for both foci – a view toward the future and a reference to the past (Zenger, 2008: 499-512). It initiates a motion between looking ahead and looking back, between anticipation and experience. Thus Psalm 126 has a proper place in the ritual of honouring the dead. It's dream about a future in which *our mouth shall be full of laughter and our tongues full of praise* (LU17, v.2) is grounded in the experience of God's liberating action. In the space that opens between dream and recall, the present reader can hook on. Accordingly, Psalm 126 is structured in two parts. These parts are structured through the signal verb *restoring* / *šwb* in v. 1 and v. 4: Vv. 1-3 deal with the history between God and His people as it resonates between past and future. Vv.4-6 focuses on the present request of restoring anew one's fortunes. On Eternity Sunday 2020 this would be the request that those who are torn out of traditions that usually help to deal with death, would be restored to entering a path of mourning and coping.

The potential of Psalm 126 to help to restore people to a path of mourning also has to do with the psalm's form, which is as such linked to a way (up). Psalm 126 belongs to the collection of songs of ascent (Psalms 120-134). The ascent may have referred to the actual ascent to Jerusalem for annual feasts or pilgrimage. Metaphorical meanings such as the way of

life or the path of mourning likewise resonate with the headline, *A song of Ascent*. Verse 6 takes this up when it says that those who go out weeping... shall come home with shouts of joy (NRSV, v.6). However, the Hebrew verbs *hllk* and *bw'* do not emphasise a movement of going out and coming back, but rather mark the beginning and end of one single way (Deeg and Schüle, 2018: 497). Psalm 126 envisions a path that holds different and even controversial experiences: those who go forth weeping shall come along with songs of joy. Likewise, despair and hope belong to one life; grief and hope belong to one mourning process; doubt and trust belong to one heart.

Between longing for future and recalling the past on an ascent that inheres weeping as well as joy, the outcry of the psalmist is rendered in two strong images. *Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb* (NRSV, v.4). The first image of water coursing through the Negeb brings about the issue of strong feelings. The watercourses of desert wadis are no gentle harmless creeks, but come suddenly and with might. They bring intense blossoming and growth. However, the intense vegetation only endures a certain period. Being seasonal streams, the Negev watercourses inhere rhythm. After a period of growth, the desert takes over again. In the context of commemorating and mourning, strong feelings are virulent, yet not always welcome. Emotions like fear, anger, grief or guilt might be feared. At the same time emotions such as relief, blossoming and growth or even joie de vivre might feel inadequate or a sort of betrayal. In the storm of feelings, both the intenseness and the rhythm of this image may bring relief and comfort.

Rhythm hums through the second image as well. *May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy* (NRSV, v.5). In an urban German perspective, sowing and reaping often comes as a rather romantic picture. However, with climate change, in many places, sowing becomes an increasingly hard and uncertain work. Will the seed rise up to a harvest and the promise of seasonal rhythm hold? More and more often, sowing is related to a state of shortage and the agonizing decision to give away something one needs in the present for an uncertain future.

In the context of loss, I picture clasped hands that hold tight onto feelings, regrets or hopes that would need to be given away in order to rise up. Yet they are too crucial to the present to be given away. Mourning companion and author Chris Paul, in her work with people who lost someone to suicide, did research on the feeling of guilt after a close person commits suicide. In the beginning, her work focused on how people could unload the feeling of guilt, which she identified as a demoralizing and destructive emotion. Later, she came to understand various functions of guilt, for example, an emotion with a strong bonding quality, that also can help to keep in touch with the beloved one (Paul, 2016: 69). Guilt, she argues, is something one

might have to hold on to, in order to withstand the situation. A feeling to keep in one's clasped hands. Giving up guilt, one would have to let go the intenseness of the bonding it induces, and become exposed to underlying, possibly threatening feelings. Sowing involves releasing the clasped hands in order to let go and scatter the seed. Releasing hands and hearts in order to let go of feelings that have functions one does not want to lose, is something I can relate to in the image of sowing in tears. In Chris Paul's terms, sowing in tears would be a form of memory work. She suggests recalling and sharing memories as a way towards gaining a differentiated bond and relationship to the lost ones. Memories would then be like seed. Sharing memories, would be the process of opening hands in order to let go and scatter in tears. Hopefully the harvest of mourning includes weeping and singing holding tight and letting go, feeling refreshed and feeling arid as experiences of life and living.

I work as a pastor in a protestant parish in the centre of Hamburg / Germany. My focus of work is working with children and families, as well as community-oriented work in our neighbourhood. My second choice for the volume would have been Psalm 57.

Literature:

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