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LIVING WITH HEARTFELT SADNESS

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

MATTHEW 5:4

The earth is weeping

I am currently reading a fascinating book that tells the story of the Indian wars for the American West. The inside cover says: 'In a sweeping narrative, Peter Cozzens tells the gripping story of the wars that destroyed native ways of life as the American nation continued its expansion onto tribal lands.' It makes harrowing reading. The treatment of the Native Americans was 'an outrage', to use the words of one of the pre-eminent generals of the West, reflecting on the injustice of it all. 'When the Indians see their wives and children starving and their last source of supplies is cut off, they go to war. And then we are sent out to kill them. It is an outrage. All tribes tell the same story.²⁰ One missionary, describing the feelings of the Indians as they were constantly driven out of land that they had previously inhabited, said: 'The very earth seems sliding from beneath their feet.'²¹ A young Miniconjou warrior called Dewey Beard described one of the massacres of Indians known as the Wounded Knee Ravine tragedy - this time of women, children and elders - when a Hotchkiss gun shelled the area where the terrified non-combatants were hiding: 'And then there went up from [my] dying people, a medley of death songs that would make the hardest hearts weep.'²²

It is right that we should weep with them over what happened. Yet this is just one example among many of 'man's inhumanity to man'. Our history books are full of the most devastating acts of barbarity, cruelty and exploitation, many of the worst of them happening in the lifetimes of our parents and grandparents. My uncle was in a Japanese POW camp in Burma and survivors have told us of the bitter hardships that had to be endured. The Holocaust, with the systematic extermination of Jews, gypsies, mentally handicapped, homosexuals, etc., was undoubtedly the darkest period of human history. Numbers range from eleven to seventeen million killed in all Nazi genocides and war crimes, with 6 million Jews executed in the concentration camps.

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 killed up to one million people, which was approximately 20% of Rwanda's population and 70% of the Tutsi people: 75,000 surviving children were orphaned. Bosnian Serb forces in 1995 killed more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica and Žepa; wider ethnic cleansing during the 1992-95 Bosnian War involved the expulsion of another 25-30,000 Bosniak civilians. The genocide of Yazidis by ISIL from 2014 to the present has been numbered in the thousands. The earth is still weeping.

Added to these are tragedies of poverty and starvation. Oxfam and other relief agencies are warning us as I write that millions of men, women and children are in need of urgent help in South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Natural disasters also take a heavy toll of human life in some of the poorest communities of the world: Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas and the country with the highest number of deaths caused by disasters in the past two decades; most of them occurring during the catastrophic earthquake of 2010 with 222,570 fatalities. The Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 in the Indian Ocean, caused by a mega earthquake, affected 14 other countries but Indonesia's death toll was the highest - 130,736 of the 165,708 fatalities. Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008 and resulted in 138,000 deaths. The earth is still weeping.

There is also deep sadness over our environmental crisis. Experts tell us that climate change, due to pollution of the atmosphere by greenhouse gases, has observable ecological and social effects. The depletion of ozone in the stratosphere results in increased levels of harmful solar ultraviolet (UV-B) radiation reaching the earth's surface, causing a range of health-related and ecological problems. Worldwide, approximately one billion people live in industrial cities where unhealthy levels of air pollution occur; and water quality is seriously degraded by contamination with pollutants, giving rise to a range of health-related and ecological effects (such as the degradation of coral reefs). Land contamination has occurred as a result of chemical and radioactive pollution, and around half of the world's mature forests have been cleared by humans despite their being an essential part of the global ecosystem and of the biosphere. They help to regulate climate; they protect soils from erosion; and they provide habitats for a vast number of plant and animal species. In 1999, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimated that one quarter of the world's mammal species and around one tenth of the world's bird species faced a significant risk of total extinction. The earth is still weeping.

Blessed are those who mourn

We have noted that Bible scholars who have written commentaries on the beatitudes identify Isaiah 61:1-7 as the key Old Testament passage that Jesus is deliberately alluding to. This is a messianic passage that announces hope for the Israelites who are languishing in exile in Babylon, torn away from their land, their city and their temple. Davies and Allison again: 'Mourning is heard because the righteous suffer, because the wicked prosper, and because God has not yet acted to reverse the situation.'²³

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered

Zion.

PSALM 137:1

Yet this will all change when the Messiah comes, says the prophet Isaiah. He will revive the fortunes of the nation, and restore Israel to her promised land. Consequently, their mourning will turn into joy: 'He has sent me to... comfort all who mourn... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair,' (Isaiah 61:1-3). Craig Evans also points us to Jeremiah 31:13 ('I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort') because 'this verse is part of a larger complex of oracles in Jeremiah 31 that speak of Israel's redemption, restoration and covenant renewal.'²⁴

These Old Testament passages help us to understand the second beatitude: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted' (Matthew 5:4). Jesus is clearly identifying himself as the Messiah who has come to announce an end to the mourning of exile: not just the exile of being separated from the land and city and temple, because that had already happened for the Jewish nation, but an end to the estrangement from God, and the rebuilding of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Those who long for this, and who grieve over the pain and brokenness of the world in its separation from God, will be comforted by the arrival of the messianic kingdom, the renewal of the covenant and the making of all things new, when God 'will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain' (Revelation 21:4).

A time to weep

There is an understandable tendency in our culture today to try to blot out the sad and painful realities of our world. Media coverage brings us so close to terrible tragedies and there is a very real anxiety of overexposure to human suffering. We can't take it any more! We want to run away and hide like ostriches, burying our heads in the sand. We want exotic holidays that transport us into another world of luxurious hotels and beautiful places. We attempt to drown our sorrows with alcohol or deaden the pain with recreational drugs. We

try to escape to nice, comfortable districts that shelter us from the challenges of urban poverty. We rush past the homeless person on the street who is asking for help. We escape into our safe, private worlds of social media, romantic novels and DVD box sets.

Now we need to keep a balance here. I am not suggesting that Christians should be killjoys, unable to enjoy themselves and the many good things in the world that God has given us. Holidays, social media and the delights of food and drink can all be enjoyed in sensible moderation, and it is important to keep a work/life balance, to make time for our friends and family and not to get overexposed to and wearied by the world's pain. Our human flourishing allows us to be happy and contented people who treasure all that God has given us to enjoy with thanksgiving and delight.

But none of this should be seen as an escape from the hard edges of life. The earth is still weeping and it is appropriate that we should share that pain and weep too. There is a place for tears as well as joy in the Christian life. The people of God in both Old and New Testaments have modelled this for us. The psalmist said, 'Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed' (Psalm 119:136). Jeremiah, thought to be the author of the book of Lamentations, described the pain of exile: 'My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground, because my people are destroyed' (Lamentations 2:11). Nehemiah wept on hearing that the walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins and his people were vulnerable to attack: 'For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven' (Nehemiah 1:4).

In the New Testament, Jesus wept over impenitent Jerusalem, which would not receive him as her Messiah (Luke 19:41). Paul wept over churches that were being troubled by false teachers who 'live as enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18). John, on the island of Patmos, broke his heart when, in his vision of heaven, no one was initially found to open the scroll in the right hand of God and so unfold his purposes for his people: 'I wept and wept because

no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside' (Revelation 5:4). The good news that the elder brought him must have come as a tremendous relief (v. 5), for the Lion of Judah is worthy, who turns out to be 'the Lamb who was slain' (v. 6).

Christians down the centuries have continued to weep over the brokenness of the world and the sin in their own lives. It has frequently been the starting place for revivals. The 18th-century evangelist Jonathan Edwards, even though he was very reasoned and measured in his preaching, frequently wept in prayer over the sinners of his day, seeing thousands touched by the love of Christ as he preached the gospel. David Brainerd, a missionary to Native Americans, wrote:

God enabled me to so agonise in prayer that I was quite wet with perspiration... the Lord visited me marvellously in prayer. I think my soul never was in such an agony before. I felt no restraint, for the treasures of divine grace were opened to me. I wrestled for my friends, for the ingathering of souls, for multitudes of poor souls.²⁵

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the minister of St Peter's Church in Dundee, knew the importance of weeping. He not only spent hours in prayer, crying over his people, but cried over them in the pulpit. 'The secret of M'Cheyne's ministry was that he carried the burden of his people, of his nation and of God's cause upon his heart'.²⁶ The evangelist Charles Finney wrote of a time when he wrestled with God over a great problem he was facing. He speaks of being 'loaded down with great agony... I struggled and groaned and agonised, but could not manage to present my case before God in words, but only in groans and tears. The Spirit struggled within me with groanings that could not be uttered'.²⁷

I personally found myself deeply moved as I read the harrowing story of a North Korean girl, Yeonmi Park.²⁸ After her father was sent to a labour camp for black-market trading, her family faced starvation.

She managed to escape with her mother to China in 2007 but fell into the hands of human sex traffickers before eventually escaping to Mongolia with the help of Christian missionaries. Moving to South Korea in 2009, she is now a human rights activist, advocating for victims of human trafficking in China. I was stunned by her courage and moved to tears in almost every chapter. I found myself praying: 'Lord, have mercy!'

Moira Stuart, an unflappable former BBC newsreader, took part in a BBC2 documentary in March 2007 in which she explored William Willberforce's part in ending Britain's shameful slave trade.²⁹ Her ancestors included both a slave and a slave owner. During her visit to Ghana, she was taken on a tour of Cape Coast Castle by Dr Abena Busia, a Ghanaian writer and academic, and was shown cells where prisoners starved or suffocated to death. When she saw boats on the adjacent beach, where slaves were led by British merchants to be exchanged for sugar, cotton and rum, she was overwhelmed. She broke down in tears and was unable to speak.

Do we allow ourselves to be moved by the pain of the world? On the website of the Christian magazine *Relevant*, there is an excellent article by Drew Griffiths, written in July 2016, following a spate of public tragedies including the horrific shooting in Orlando and massive terrorist attack in Istanbul, Turkey. It is entitled 'Christians have to mourn injustice':

Scarcely a day passes when we're not confronted with unspeakable tragedy accompanied by unrelenting grief. We never have the chance to mourn fully, to recover our emotional health before we are plunged again into the mourning cycle... Christians occupy a special place in this conversation. We are called to mourn over the presence of sin in our lives – and in the world around us... Our challenge is... to mourn well.³⁰

To 'mourn well', he suggests, involves *sympathy*, having a broken heart for others in their pain and loss; *empathy*, feeling the emotions

alongside them; *self-criticism*, seeing the darkness and sin in our own lives; and *hope*, knowing we have a Saviour who overcomes evil with good.

So where are the tears of God's people? They are precious to God, as the Israelites discovered when they cried out to him in their bitter hardship and slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23–25). In fact, says the psalmist, these tears of lament are so special to him that he stores them up in a bottle (Psalm 56:8, NRSV). The rector of St Aldates, Oxford, Canon Charlie Cleverly, writes in 'Rule of life', based on the beatitudes:

When God works, it seems there is often the mourning that Jesus calls 'blessed' – mourning over sin, deep regret for being away from God, longing for 'home' and the hope of a homecoming to God. All this leads to tears... people cry over loved ones who are away from God, they cry for children and young people and the elderly, and over the general state of society.³¹

Personal reflection

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

- Do I consider affliction a misfortune and a punishment, as some people in the world do, or as an opportunity to be like Christ?
- What are the reasons when I am sad: the same as God's or the same as the world's?
- Do I seek to console others or only to be consoled myself?
- Do I know how to keep an adversity a secret between God and me, not talking about it every chance I get?

Prayerful response

A prayer of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer as the Collect for Lent

Almighty and everlasting God,
 you hate nothing that you have made
 and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
 create and make in us new and contrite hearts
 that we, worthily lamenting our sins
 and acknowledging our wretchedness,
 may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
 perfect remission and forgiveness;
 through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
 who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever. Amen.³²

Discussion questions for small groups

Those who mourn

Starter (15 mins)

- When did you last cry?
- Do tears come easily to you?
- Are they a sign of weakness?

Main course (60 mins)

- Why were the Israelites mourning in exile in Babylon (Psalm 137:1), and how was their comfort going to come (Isaiah 40:1)?
- In what ways do we experience similar feelings of being in exile today, causing us to mourn like the Israelites?
- Do you feel a godly grief over persistent sins in your own life? Do you find it a help to take that grief to the Lord in confession and repentance?

- What situations in the world do you find yourself grieving over? Why do they matter to you and how do you channel your grief?
- Try to describe how God feels about these situations. How do we know that his heart breaks over his broken and hurting world?
- How does God comfort us in our mourning and bind up the broken-hearted? Can you give an example of how he has done that for you?

Dessert (15 mins)

- Take a while to remember how God feels about our sins, and what it cost him to pay for our forgiveness. (Mark 10:45). Spend some time asking for forgiveness.
- Remember situations in the world where there is terrible suffering and over which God's heart must break: lift them before the Lord and cry to him for him to intervene and bring comfort.
- Praise God that there will be an end to crying and pain and tears, and ask him to usher in a kingdom where all sin and suffering will be banished (Revelation 21:1-4).