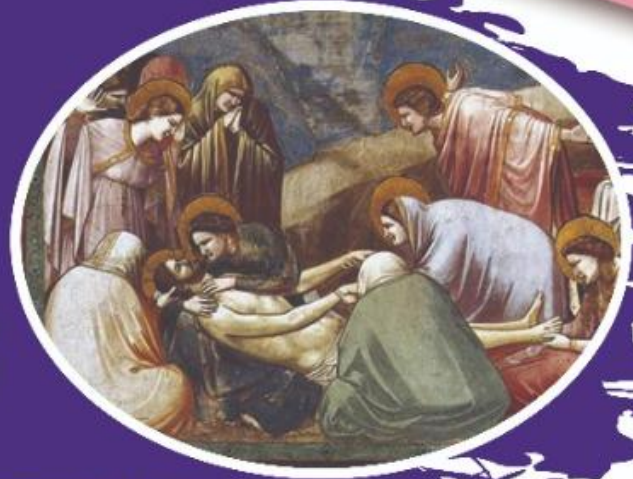


Two ways of Praying amid the Pandemic

By John Alexander SDB



Devout men and women pray in good and bad times, and “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Most of us pray devoutly in times of need and crisis. But how do you pray in times such as this, when we are surrounded by deaths, sickness, suffering, loneliness and fear during this Covid-19 pandemic? Two weeks ago, a young woman who tragically lost her mother to Covid wrote this to me: “I want to tell you that I never cried when I saw my mother’s body in the mortuary, I am unable to cry. I have become numb, seeing too much deaths, and bodies, suffering, and families shouting out their pain for their loved ones, in helplessness.” We do not know how this woman and thousands of other people in such conditions will come to terms with the loss and uncertain future. Almost every family has a sad pandemic story of loss and suffering to grapple with.

God’s people in the Bible were no strangers to deep crisis. They too had their Covid-19 moments. Floods, famines, plagues, earthquakes and wars were part of the history of the people of Israel. How did they pray in these extremely difficult times? They trusted in the power and mercy of God to save them from their perils while they, at the summons of prophets, also introspected and renewed their faithfulness to God. During the period of exile, for example, when the people of Israel complained against God, they were bitten by poisonous snakes and died. It was only at their repentance that God asked Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. All who looked at it were healed (Num 21:1-9). Many years later, Jesus declared this as a symbol of His death on the cross: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

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God's promise to king Solomon during the consecration of the Temple makes this expiatory prayer even more explicit and praiseworthy: "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain... or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chron 7:13-14). No doubt, the suffering caused by the virus is enormous. And yet what will prevail is our trust in the Lord that He will deliver us from this disaster, and our readiness to deepen our relationship with Him. We pray with the psalmist, "Be merciful to me, O God...in the shadow of your wings, I will take refuge until the destroying storms pass by" (Ps 57:1).

Lamentation and Healing

There is, however, another tradition of prayer in the Bible, called lamentation, which goes beyond mere venting of emotions and frustrations to serve as a means to grow and mature in one's faith. Lament is an experience of helplessness and losing control. It is what happens when people ask "why" and do not have an answer or a meaningful justification. If this pandemic was meant to "purify" a sinful world, as some people proclaim, why are then so many good people dying and suffering from this virus, not merely the sinners and criminals? Two staff members of our college, Siva Kumar (40 years), father of three daughters and Kalaiarasi (32 years), mother of a 5-year-old daughter, succumbed to Covid, as I was writing these lines. How are we going to care for these and other millions of Covid-orphans and Covid-widows in the world, and possibly tell them about a God who cares and heals? Who will console the families of Covid-martyrs of doctors, nurses, priests and care-givers who sacrificed their lives to save and console others?



Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, in his reflection on Psalms, understands lamentation as authentic prayer. He writes: "The use of these 'psalms of darkness' may be judged by the world to be acts of unbelief and failure, but for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith. It is an act of bold faith on the one hand because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God."

Lamentation is also weeping with those who weep in solidarity. The Book of Lamentation in the Old Testament is typically a “communal lament” – a community and a nation mourning for the destroyed city in the hope that God will act on their behalf: “My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city” (Lam. 2:11). This means that in face of any crisis, not just Covid-19, we are called to move beyond our egoism and self-pity, and look more broadly at the suffering world, and see in what way we can bring about healing and consolation. Commenting on the story of the Good Samaritan in the Bible (Lk 10:25-37), Pope Francis, in his book, *Let Us Dream* wrote, “to act in a Samaritan way in a crisis means letting myself be struck by what I see, knowing that suffering will change me.”



The “scandalous mystery” of the Bible is that God too laments. He does not just watch and control from a distance. God Yahweh was heart-broken, when his own bride, the people of Israel, turned away. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and resorted to the prayer of lament on the cross by using Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The world-famous 14th Century painting “Lamentation of Christ” by the Italian artist Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy depicts movingly Christ's body that has been brought down from the cross is surrounded by his weeping family, friends and a host of angels. His head is placed in the arms of his mother, the Virgin Mary, while Mary Magdalene grieves at his feet, and the beloved disciple John raises his arms open wide in desperate shock and anguish.

Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore was not a Christian, but he wanted everyone to grow in devotion to a God who is bound with the struggling world. In *Gitanjali*, he wrote: “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!... Open thine eyes and see thy God, not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones...” When we lament in prayer, weeping with those who weep, we too can recognize God enshrined in the wounded and the suffering, languishing in hospitals and quarantines, and reach out to them to offer relief and comfort. A recent WhatsApp poster stated this more plainly: “Church is closed during lockdowns, but Jesus is doing the home visits.”

Fr. **John Alexander** SDB, PhD,
is Rector at Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur, India.
Please send your thoughts, experiences
and feedback to: contactjalexander@gmail.com 9445238565 (WhatsApp).

