

You who are my comforter

Is there any good to be found in being a Jeremiah?

Lorna Hallahan | St Chad's Fullarton | 21 September 2025

You who are my Comforter^[a] in sorrow,
my heart is faint within me.

¹⁹ Listen to the cry of my people
from a land far away:

“Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?”

“Why have they aroused my anger with their images,
with their worthless foreign idols?”

²⁰ “The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
and we are not saved.”

²¹ Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn, and horror grips me.

²² Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?

Why then is there no healing
for the wound of my people?

9 ^[b]¹ Oh, that my head were a spring of water
and my eyes a fountain of tears!

I would weep day and night
for the slain of my people.

Please indulge me. I want to dedicate these reflections to the memory of my friend Professor Marion Maddox who died this week. Marion, who was only 60, held 2 PhDs, one in theology, the other in politics. As an expert in politics and religion, she became the Director of the Social Justice Centre at Macquarie University. She published three distinctive books, most notably *God Under Howard*, her prescient mapping of the rise of certain evangelical churches in Australia while the so-called mainstream churches lost reputation and numbers, and in turn what this means for politics. We met at an Australian Student Christian Movement Conference when she was 15 and I was 21. From those early days I have been almost haunted by a question she had put to her father Robert, also a theologian and Methodist minister. After hearing him preach one day she challenged him: *why don't preachers tell the truth in church?* She had heard him thinking critically about Christian faith in conversations with his colleagues and family and I suspect, edited his writings. Yet, in church he was so sure that God's love was powerful, consoling and available through prayer. His reply: *people need to know that they are not alone, they need hope in their lives.* Both of them were right. I say 'haunted' because I really do try to tell some truths. It is an honour to be invited to reflect on scriptures, to bring the thoughts of theologians and others to this place, and to bring questions that challenge, even unsettle us. Thank you for affording me this privilege.

Today, I chose to work with Jeremiah. (Frankly, the logic of the parable in Luke evades me and, despite my efforts to find a coherent insight, I remain at a loss.). But, in addition, this poem from Jeremaih seems so pertinent for us at this time.

What is setting your hair on fire this week?

I have guessed at 10 triggers to bring irritation, revulsion, or despair. Sorrow or anger.

1. War, especially in countries on the African continent, Ukraine and Palestine.
2. Algal bloom on our shores

3. The rise of authoritarian, harsh, punitive and potentially corrupt governments, perhaps particularly in the US
4. The use of the military to suppress various uprisings, to intimidate population and to deport the stateless
5. Failure to close the gap in Aboriginal health
6. The plastic throughout our lands and our oceans
7. The rise of Artificial Intelligence with its shadow of lying
8. The difficulty in getting to a carbon-neutral world
9. The persistence of discrimination and injustice against marginalized and vulnerable populations
10. The fracture and uncertainty in our interpersonal relations

Feel free to add your own...the point is, that we are increasingly in a world of worries for people like us.

Jeremiah's life as a prophet rose in the years before the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587BCE. He came from the priestly class, was apparently aware of his calling before he stepped into the public sphere. He trained himself in the qualities required for his mission: *not being afraid, standing up to speak, speaking as told, and going where sent*. Initially Jeremiah denounced the people for sexual immorality, injustice and greed, and for abandoning the One God for false idols. Predicting devastation, he called upon the people to repent so that God would redeem them from the coming catastrophe. He was persecuted, including being placed in a cesspit. Unable to climb out, his death seemed certain until he was rescued by an Egyptian slave. He was lonely, mocked with diverse attempts made to silence him. So, he hired a secretary called Baruch who wrote down his sayings, poems, and laments. After the defeat in Jerusalem, the people were transported to Babylon, enslaved in the huge building enterprise that was the largest city in the world. (If like me you wondered where that was, I'm here to tell you that it is in current day Iraq, about 85 kilometers outside Baghdad on the Euphrates River).

Jeremiah Unterman's *From Repentance to Redemption : Jeremiah's Thought in Transition* charts the prophet's changing thoughts as the calamity of the era was played out. Unterman's thesis is that this thought progressed through three stages: in Jeremiah's early prophecies on redemption human repentance and divine mercy are equal factors; between 597 and 587 repentance plays a secondary role to YHWH's mercy; during the period of the destruction of Jerusalem the prophet's despair at the people's inability to repent results in the elimination of the demand for repentance, so that redemption would now depend solely on God's mercy. We hear him today, in that terrible despair.

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I think I can safely predict that every one of us has felt grief as though our head were a spring of water and our eyes a fountain of tears. Despair is so human. It is unavoidable, it can be persistent, and it sure feels as though God, that loving consoling force we search for in our lives, just left the room. This is the truth we must sit with. In our small and personal lives and in our bigger, grander collective lives, over times, over distances and over bitter, bloody struggles which never have victors, we find that joy eludes us. Not always and

forever, but in periods of turmoil and powerlessness. What can anyone do about the state of the world as every day it seems we move closer to spreading disaster?

So, I think that Jeremiah captures our sorrows. Note, in this section I have just read how it is vicarious and profoundly compassionate ...*since my people are crushed, I am crushed*... In conversations during the week, I hear from people who report these feelings...not even our people/my people, not those who are our kin or acquaintances but those we don't know but we know of. How the news distresses us and makes us feel even less effective. How predictions about climate change make us anxious for our children and coming generations. How rising authoritarianism makes us fearful that the progress we have made toward justice and decency will be lost. I could, in the mode of Jeremiah, go on.

I, by my beloveds, have been accused of being too gothic. It is hard not to be when you are a social worker. The daily world is one of shadows of our society, dealing with the struggles of those reviled by a wider community, often proudly living a clean and upright life. But, this I do know, you cannot work for peace and justice without being able to look violence and injustice squarely in the eye and name them. And then to honestly feel what that knowledge does to our hopes and our sense of ourselves. This is called an aporia...a chestnut too hard to crack, an impasse.

I'm sure you are familiar with that term, being a Jeremiah. Someone forecasting downfall and falling into lament and despair. In the Australian culture it's gathering before Mass and hearing Hanrahan telling all who would listen that we will all be rooned before the year is out. The poet, John O'Brien was Monseigneur Partick Hartigan. We sense that this was one of his parishioners! Perhaps, after our service, you will gather and bemoan how Hallahan predicted we will all be rooned! I regret that, in this colloquial sense I am often a Jeremiah. How can any good come from it?

As we are in the Season of Creation, I want to finish by focusing our attention on a warming planet, threatening human and other populations of creatures and plants. The website on The Season of Creation contains these words: *To*

hope in a biblical context does not mean to stand still and quiet, but to act, pray, change, and reconcile with Creation and the Creator in unity, metanoia (repentance), and solidarity.

Here I quote from Maike Maria Domsel in conversation with her colleagues as they reflected on recent climate emergencies in the Northern Hemisphere.

Their article is called: *Between Despair and Honest Hope: Facing the Aporetic Space of the Climate Crisis*

In the context of addressing the climate crisis, profound dilemmas emerge, notably intertwined with feelings of guilt. We exist within a system causing significant harm to the environment. Urgent and comprehensive transformation is essential, touching all aspects of life if we want to alleviate severe climate change impacts and secure a sustainable future. However, implementing such changes is intricate, requiring drastic alterations to our current lifestyle. Coupled with a pervasive sense of powerlessness driven by the belief that individual actions lack impact or that personal efforts are fragmented, the feeling of being unable to “save anything anyway” creates a sense of imprisonment in aporias. Yet, from this aporetic space, new perspectives for action and hope can emerge, particularly by initiating individual impulses, small courageous steps of climate justice in community with fellow human beings living “around the corner,” in the same habitat. []

Despair can make people speechless and paralyze them.

Compassionate action can empower them to keep on caring for the common house. The signs of the times are challenging us to face this aporetic space, to live through its ambiguities and to keep on striving for a better future. Every possible talent, every available competency—from technical innovation to theological consideration—is needed and should be empowered in society and school. The underlying force that drives us is “honest hope” (Moore 2020), “hope as the deliberate act to interrupt isolation and to dare communication” (Roebben 2017, 201). It

is the power of the Spirit “hovering over the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2).

Jeremiah moved to a position that said the sufferings of his people provoked a compassionate response from their God, offering a new Covenant, mercy rather than harsh condemnation. For those of us in the Christian Church that new covenant is written in the incarnation, the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, at one point accused of being Jeremiah, as he named the oppression of his people and the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. His actions of honest hope were on an intimate scale, with his band of confreres, the people whose bodies he touched in tenderness and healing, his deliberate acts to interrupt isolation and dare communication.

From this example, I think we are called to grasp the nearest edge of this honest hope. This means that we must not avert our eyes from the calamities, not deny our potential for paralysis and despair, while hearing the voices of others calling for justice and using our gifts and privileges wherever possible. I'll finish on the words of Frances and Anna Lappe:

"We must warn you, though: this kind of hope isn't clean or tidy. Honest hope has an edge. It's messy. It requires that we let go of all pat answers, all preconceived formulas, all confidence that our sailing will be smooth. It's not a resting point. Honest hope is movement."

My friend Marion was a joyful, kind person with a taste for all that is lovely in this world. Her life was often very hard, but she persisted in confronting the pat answers, seeking to speak the truth with compassion and conviction. From our early days in the Student Christian Movement, I was always aware that, along with excellent sour dough, she could contribute her talents and competencies to that stream of human history which moves against violence, inequality and environmental destruction.

May our God, wondrous community of infinite love, bless us all with justice, peace, love and beauty, God who is Creator, Word and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen. *Based upon “A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation” by Pope Francis from Laudato Sí.*