

# Owning emotion

## The honest place of lament in our worship

**A**vet had to put an aged donkey to sleep. When he had done this, the owner and he had a cup of tea. When they returned to the field, the other donkeys had gathered round and were carefully covering their dead friend with straw. They were mourning the loss naturally and powerfully.

The sad thing is that we have often lost the art of grieving – whether for a loved one, for our sin, or for our part in the suffering that marks the lives of so many. The emotions are there, buried, but our culture and our theology do not encourage us to express them, on the way to a more wholesome healing.

The theme of this article has just been brought home to me in a powerful way. I have recently returned from a SOMA visit to Rumbek, a key town in Southern Sudan, in the heart of ‘Dinka-land’ – an area populated by nomadic cattle people, with a rich tradition of composing what we might in another setting call ‘ballads’ – songs which tell a story. For those from this background who become Christians, the writing of a song is part of your testimony – and they are powerful and deeply evocative.

**Worship needs to be the offering of all we are, all we feel, all we have, to our God**

But the Christians from this part of Southern Sudan have a problem. Not only have they experienced unremitting conflict and suffering for 40 years, but they have been forced to abandon their traditional nomadic way of life, and settle in towns and villages to get food and water for themselves and the few cattle that remain. This has meant that they have a huge reservoir of unused energy which easily erupts in violence.

This legacy – and their isolation from other Christians – has inevitably marked their worship. Their songs often reflect their despair and grief. When we invited them to lead in worship, even though we could not understand the words, we were caught up in lament. They had little in their lives to rejoice about, and little experience of hope.

In a Christian culture that is in the most part isolated from outside influences, people do not learn their theology from books but from their hymns and songs. One of the future tasks of SOMA and others ministering in areas such as Rumbek is to help the Christians there to find some hope for the future, and to begin to express that in their worship – so that their worship can become more as it should be: the offering of all we are, all we feel, all we have, to our God.

In my work with SOMA I have been privileged to experience (and later to reflect on) different kinds

of worship, not only in Sudan, but in other countries we have worked in. I am sure these snippets do not give the total picture – and I ask forgiveness where I am extrapolating unjustly from one or two observations, to make a generalisation.



**We have lost the art of grieving. We do not know how to lament. The emotions are there, buried, but our culture and theology do not encourage us to express them. DON BREWIN, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF SOMA UK writes in the light of his recent visit to Southern Sudan where Christians express their people's unremitting years of conflict and suffering through ballads.**

In Spain, after the lavish Good Friday processions, especially in the South, the tradition is then to go on holiday for the Easter weekend. The danger of this is that some people never move from ‘Good Friday’ to ‘Easter Day’ in their worship – so they never experience the joy of the Resurrection. Salvation remains an intellectual concept – not balanced by experience.

In Rwanda, where SOMA was heavily involved in the years immediately following the 1994 genocide, children used to be taught to laugh when they



were in pain, as showing emotion was a sign of weakness. How is this ‘structural denial’ reflected in the need for the Christians there to bring their feelings to God?

My own early experience of planning worship has tended to come from the opposite end of the emotional (and theological?) spectrum. As a ‘youth pastor’ in the 1970’s, we started doing experimental worship services, to try to get the young people to come to church. There were very few materials to hand and we had to find our own ways of expressing what was going on in the mainly middle-class youth culture of that Sheffield parish. But one thing sticks in my mind – that we hardly ever sang about ‘Good Friday’ – the songs were all about ‘Easter’. The suffering of Jesus, on which in fact our salvation depends, was conveniently forgotten – we moved on quickly to the more comfortable thought of the Resurrection.

This reflected the theology of the time, which itself subconsciously fitted the ways of thinking that were current in society – conveniently ignoring the cries of the poor, the unhealed and the marginalised, offering spiritual Valium which in the short term enabled people to continue in a life of comfortable but disincarnated denial of what was going on in the world.

It was some years before song-writers such as Graham Kendrick began to address the need to think about Good Friday, the appalling suffering of Christ, and the suffering that still, and increasingly goes on in the world of today – even for Christians. It is as if Christians had sought to remain detached from the increasing chaos in families, in societies, and in the created order itself – focussing instead on heaven, and the life to come.

**Divide between evangelism and ‘social Gospel’ gave way to more holistic approach**

Part of the reason for this goes back to the divide that grew up in the early part of the last century between those who were concerned for evangelism, and those who advocated a ‘social Gospel’, with concerns for justice, the plight of the poor, and so on. It was not until the foundation of such organisations as Tear Fund (by the late George Hoffman and others) that there began to develop a more holistic approach to the Gospel. This has been reflected in a better balance of songs and hymns in our worship.

But there is one key part of life which in my view is still neglected here in the West, with our sanitised approach to pain, suffering and death. We see these in the lives of other people, elsewhere (carefully edited) on our TV screens, but we do not know how to own them here and now. So when an atrocity

