**Sermon April 2nd 2017 – A Lent Lament**

There was a big concert up in Auckland last weekend, Adele, anyone know anyone who went?

The demographic of the people who attended that seem to have been around my age and older, but I am so out of the loop these days that I don’t really have much of an idea of who she is other than she did the last James Bond song – but she is obviously popular!

With Anwyn, these days our house is all Taylor Swift and the Moana soundtrack…

But, there was another concert in NZ last weekend too! This other band played both in Auckland and here in Wellington and seemed to attract a mainly younger audience. Some of their songs do sound familiar so I must’ve heard them on the radio, but again I didn’t really know who they were, but some friends on Facebook were really raving about them – ***21 Pilots*** they’re called

*Any 21 Pilots fans in the congregation today?*

*Anyone go to their concert?*

One of my colleagues was especially effusive about their concert, even though she is about the same age as me and got tired and just went home to bed half way through - but she prompted me to give them a go. I like what I heard and so I shall play to you now this new discovery in my life… 21 Pilots singing **Screens**.

It’s a song with an interesting mix of musical styles - an optimistic piano line, being joined by a drum machine, then a cheerful ukulele, with a phatt electronic bass coming in later, before the singer breaks into a rap.

So sit back and enjoy, but also take note of what they are saying and how that fits the music…

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZsY9s5eN-E>

My colleague said she was surrounded at this concert by late teens and uni students. She said that the band stuck with that refrain “***we’re broken people***” for quite a while – with everyone around her singing along, hugging and crying and waving their hands around in the air. She said it was like the altar-call at a Pentecostal evangelistic rally!

This all reminded me of a book I read a while back and have spoken a bit about, by the atheist philosopher Alain de Botton. He thought that the move away from religion had brought quite a break down in Western society, but, as someone who doesn’t believe in God, he was trying to pick out the best bits from different faiths to try and construct a religion for atheists that could try to patch up some of the mess.

Naturally I thought that idea was a bit silly, but his analysis of Christianity from the outside was fascinating! And in his estimation, *one of the most powerful teachings of Christianity is the belief that we are all broken*, we are all broken people.

He wrote that in modern Western society, church is the only place where it is socially acceptable for grown men to cry… (grown women do seem to have other spaces)

Out there everyone is trying to be so cool, trying to present an image of success and fulfilment, trying to keep up with the Joneses, not wanting to be seen as being weak in anyway, or out of date.

But in here, in church, we know that we are all screwed up!

- We know that we all struggle to hold it together some times,

- that we all stress and worry,

- that we all sin and mess up,

- and that we are all some way off from being the person we wish we were… the person we were made to be…

1) In church we know all that, but, we also know that ***we are all in the same boat***. No-one here can claim to be holier or better than anyone else, for when we stand before God we all stand in a place of humility and repentance.

2) And, in church we remember that ***God knows all that about us and accepts us anyway*** – reminding us of how dependant we are on God’s love.

We try to be cool but God sees through our masks and just wants us to take that mask off, so that we can receive a hug. In fact, God wants to welcome us and embrace us so much, despite our brokenness, that God died for us on the cross as Jesus of Nazareth.

*The cross proclaims to us that God will go to great lengths to welcome us home*, screwed up though we may be. All we need to do to accept that welcome is to have faith and invite Jesus into our lives.

So, when I Googled them, it wasn’t a surprise to discover that the members of 21 Pilots are Christians - though they are not regarded as a ‘Christian band.’ Their Christian faith influences their lyrics, but in a subtle way (and possibly, when you embrace the label of a ‘Christian band, then expectation then becomes that you’ll have I tall together, and not act like broken people?). In their songs they don’t mention God, but they happily confess that they are broken people and encourage others to sing along and do the same.

In the Bible, this kind of openly confronting the brokenness in us and our world, and complaining about it a bit, is called “**lament**.” There is quite a lot of lament in the Bible, including Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem which we read.

In fact there is a whole book of the Bible dedicated to lament! Which unsurprisingly is called the Book of Lamentations. ***The Book of Psalms*** is really focused on this practice of lament as well, with around half of the Psalms being Psalms of lament.

And this is fascinating, because the Psalms are the songs the Jews would sing in worship… Imagine that, coming to church to worship God in song, with half the songs we sing being songs of lament – songs of confession and complaint and questioning, where we honestly confront the brokenness in ourselves and in our world…

**Psalm 130** which we began our service with is regarded as a classic Psalm of lament, mainly because of it’s opening verse –

1 “Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord!” (x2)

That’s a good verse to memorise and begin our own prayers with when life isn’t going so well… Out of the depths I cry to you Lord! I’ve had an experience this week when I could own those words.

Psalm 130 doesn’t ***complain*** too much though; there’s no demanding to know why the wicked prosper, asking God to smash in the teeth of our enemies, or to drop grand pianos on their heads, that sort of thing doesn’t appear.

However, it isn’t shy! Verse 2 *demands* God’s attention!

2 “Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!”

But then, in verses 3-4 the Psalmist remembers their brokenness, remembers that perhaps they might be in the depths because of their own sinfulness and brokenness…

*Alongside this*, it also acknowledges that we cannot draw near God in our own strength – we need to be forgiven and welcomed in order to be able to worship God, but this forgiveness and welcome are freely offered by God.

3 “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.”

***Because we are broken people***… we *need* a word of grace and forgiveness from our Creator, we cannot move forward without one! If we tried we’d probably just mess it up again. We are dependent on God’s love and guidance.

And so we wait for a word… but it is a hopeful waiting because God is good, and in the light of Jesus we see that God has declared his love for us in the cross. (In fact Jesus is called the Word of God, so in Jesus have we in fact already heard God’s Word?)

And so, despite starting with lament, starting with a cry to God from the depths, the Psalm finishes with **hope**…

5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

***The Psalmist is still in the depths***, still waiting for that word of grace and life and forgiveness so that they can get up and move forward. But this time in the depths doesn’t breed despair, because God is there in the depths too, “with the Lord there is steadfast love, and great power to redeem,” and so this word will come - and what a beautiful word it will be…

So, *hope in the Lord O Israel*, O people of God! For it is He who can and will redeem us from all our iniquities and brokenness.

And that is part of the reason I like that 21 Pilots song – it is remarkably honest for a pop song in admitting our brokenness, but the music that accompanies it is really cheerful! It isn’t gloomy, and it isn’t harsh.

Instead it’s got a happy ukulele and an optimistic piano riff.

Yes we are broken people which sux, which can bring some **serious pain and darkness** into the world, and which needs confessing and repenting of.

But, we need to remember:

1) that we’re no more broken then the person next to us – when we stand before God we are all standing on the same level;

2) that God loves us, *and as we confess and repent*, God welcomes us anyway, through Jesus Christ the Word of God who gave his life to redeem us from our iniquities.

Admitting and repenting of our brokenness brings us peace, peace with ourselves and peace with God, and it gives us hope for the future…. Lament is good for the soul!

So, some space now for private lamenting if you too feel that you are crying out to God today from the depths, if you have something in your life the Spirit is calling you to repent of, or if you are upset this morning about the brokenness of the world.

You are allowed to complain, God is big enough to handle it – in fact God appreciates honesty.

Or if you can’t find your own words you may pray again the words of the prayer on the back on the notices…

And as we do, we’ll play that 21 Pilots song again, but a bit quieter this time...

*Reflection…*

A Prayer of Lament for Lent

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you, does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore I trust you always, though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

- Thomas Merton