

BREAKING THE SYNDROME OF SILENCE: FINDING SPEECH FOR PREACHING IN A CONTEXT OF HIV AND AIDS¹

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“After I was told that I was HIV positive I drove a long way into some highlands, feeling pretty miserable. I remember that I sat in that remote spot for most of the day, just howling my head off. I think that what was happening that day was the beginning of grieving, grieving for my life and my death.”

(A priest living with AIDS)²

Abstract

This article diagnostically surveys the present context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in South Africa and comments on the syndrome of silence in this regard. Several reasons contributing towards this syndrome are listed. The article takes as hypothesis the fact that preaching can indeed play a meaningful role in the transformation of attitudes and values concerning HIV and AIDS. In the light of this hypothesis, and the fact that preaching could inter alia be understood as a language event, preaching is described as language of hope. The latter is defined as language of lament that needs to be reclaimed; as language of hope, that operates with certain God-images; and as language of community, within which preaching as language of hopeful lament can come to fruition.

Key words: Preaching, Lament, Hope, Community, Language

1. The Context: HIV and AIDS³

The latest statistics⁴ on HIV and AIDS could rightly be called the mother of all nightmares. They can be presented here only in broad strokes. Worldwide approximately 40 million

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² Cadwallader 1992:3.

³ It is taken as point of departure that practical theology and therefore preaching should be contextual (cf. Pieterse 2001:4ff). Of course, there are different models of contextual theology, for instance, the translation, the anthropological, the praxis, the correlation, the transcendental and the human ecological models (cf. Bergman 2003:87-112). In this paper I lean strongly on Pieterse's approach to homiletics as a hermeneutic communicative act in the service of the gospel in the congregation and in society (2001:15ff).

⁴ These statistics are a combination of information from UNAIDS, the Department of Health, South Africa, and CABS – Christian AIDS Bureau for Southern Africa. The figures for AIDS-related deaths may, however, be only the tip of the iceberg. Often doctors will not indicate on death certificates what the real causes of deaths were, only illnesses that presented themselves as symptoms of deficient immune systems – for instance, pneumonia. In this regard former president Nelson Mandela again proved to be a remarkable example of

people are living with AIDS. 8000 people die from AIDS each day – more than twice the number that lost their lives during the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001. Every 10 seconds one person dies from AIDS-related illnesses, and during those 10 seconds two people are newly infected. There are 17 000 new infections every day – of those 2000 are children and 15 000 between the ages of 15-49.

Southern Africa is home to about 30% of all people living with AIDS, yet the region is populated by only 2% of the global population. 9500 new infections occur daily, 1400 of those being babies. In one year, more people will die in South Africa from AIDS than were killed during the tsunami in Asia. By the end of 2005 there were five and a half million people living with HIV in South Africa, and almost 1000 AIDS deaths and 1700 new infections occurring every day. According to estimates, 60-70% of the military in South Africa are HIV positive; 1 out of 5 miners is infected; so also 1 out of 200 teachers.

All the wars of the 20th century led to 33 million deaths. In only 20 years AIDS has taken more than 20 million people. If the pandemic continues, 10 million South Africans will die from AIDS-related diseases by 2010. Over the next 10 years 35-46% of medical schemes' expenditure will be AIDS related. Already 15% of our civil service is estimated to be affected by AIDS. One can only imagine how the economy will be weakened through loss of labor. How absenteeism will paralyse productivity. How the young democracy of South Africa will be crippled through loss of political leadership. How the social services will strain under the pressure.

Added to this is the tragedy of the growing number of AIDS orphans. 15 million children have lost one or both their parents worldwide. UNAIDS estimated that there were 1.2 million South African children living as orphans as a result of AIDS in 2005, compared to 780,000 in 2003. Teenagers are heading households, raising their siblings. Grandmothers are raising their grandchildren, having buried their own children behind their simple houses because of AIDS.

African pastors are burying people every day of every week; they are in the burial business. Often people have to be buried in an upright position for lack of space. And the bad news is: *We are only at the beginning of the pandemic*. If these trends continue, 70 million people will die by 2020; 348 million people will be infected by the year 2040 – mainly women.

South Africa is currently experiencing one of the most severe bouts of HIV in the world. A survey published in 2004 found that South Africans spent more time at funerals than they did having their hair cut, shopping or having barbecues. It also found that more than twice as many people had been to a funeral in the past month than had been to a wedding. *Words cannot do justice to the tragedy that is enfolding amongst us, specifically in the Southern African context*. I believe the cartoonist Shapiro was right when he spoke about "the new struggle" in South Africa, depicting it with an image reminiscent of the famous photo of Hector Petersen, who died during the student's uprising in 1976. A new *kairos* has indeed dawned upon us.

transparency. When his son died of AIDS in 2005, he publicised the cause of his death in an effort to challenge the stigma that surrounds HIV infection: "*Let us give publicity to HIV/AIDS and not hide it, because [that is] the only way to make it appear like a normal illness.*" (BBC.co.uk (2005), 'Mandela's eldest son dies of Aids', 6th January 2005).



2. A Syndrome of Silence?

The statistics on AIDS are shocking, to say the least, and saddening, because we encounter real people, real families, real suffering behind these clinical data. It is therefore a remarkable and incomprehensible fact that this pandemic, even after 20 years, has to a large extent been greeted with silence in certain communities. Specifically African cultures, which are still predominately patriarchal (cf. Breetvelt 2005:8ff), are notorious for the *syndrome of silence*⁵ in this regard. Open discussions on sexuality are still treated by many as a taboo. Those suffering from sexually transmitted diseases are often stigmatized and even ostracized from society (cf. Munro 2005:41 ff; also Daniels 2003:6 ff). In 1998 Gugu Dlamini, an AIDS activist in Durban, was beaten to death by her neighbors after declaring that she was HIV positive on World AIDS Day – a death epitomizing the extreme consequence of the syndrome of silencing and stigmatization. Gender inequalities marginalize even further those who contract these diseases (cf. Ackermann 2001:11-16; also Pienaar and Van den Berg 2005:96 ff; Dube 2005: 61 ff; Nicolson 1995:47).

This *culture of denial* has been illustrated by telling incidents on governmental level in the recent past. President Thabo Mbeki's expressed disbelief in the exclusive link between HIV and AIDS is well documented. In September 2000 he stated: "*Does HIV Cause AIDS? Can a virus cause a syndrome? How? It can't, because a syndrome is a group of diseases resulting from acquired immune deficiency. Indeed, HIV contributes, but other things contribute as well.*"⁶ His flirtation with alternative views on the cause of AIDS has been met with dismay. In 2000 Mbeki included a number of "AIDS dissidents", such as the controversial American scientist Peter Duesberg, in a committee set up to advise the government on tackling the AIDS crisis. In the same year hundreds of delegates walked out of the Inter-

⁵ Several commentators have made reference to this syndrome, as well as the detrimental effects it has on the efforts to combat HIV and AIDS. Cf. Maluleke 2005:68 ff; also Philips 2006:328 ff.

⁶ Iclinic (2000), 'How Can a Virus Cause a Syndrome? Asks Mbeki', September 21.

national AIDS Conference in Durban in protest after Mbeki reiterated his view that HIV is not wholly responsible for AIDS. Wide publicity was given to President Mbeki's comment that he does not know anybody in South Africa who has AIDS.⁷

Also well known is the government's frequently repeated argument that an increase in access to antiretroviral treatment is not necessarily the best way to stop the AIDS pandemic, and that other treatment options need to be considered. There is evidence that certain politicians continue to question scientific consensus on AIDS. The Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang has famously urged people to eat lots of beetroot and garlic to fight off the illness. Her stance has angered many, including the revered South African cleric Desmond Tutu: "*We are playing with the lives of people, with the lives of mothers who would not have died if they had had drugs. If people want garlic and potatoes let them have them, but let's not play games. Stop all this discussion about garlic.*"⁸

The latest incident concerns former Deputy President Jacob Zuma. In April 2006, on trial for the alleged rape of an HIV-positive woman, Zuma was found not guilty but confessed that he had had consensual sex with the woman despite being aware that she was HIV positive. He stated his belief that HIV was not easily transmitted from women to men, and that he had showered after sex in the belief that this would minimize his chances of contracting HIV. There was widespread dismay amongst the AIDS-prevention community that a politician (particularly one who had once been head of the National AIDS Council) could display such ignorance, and a fear that his statement would cause confusion amongst the public, undermining years of AIDS-prevention campaigns. The National AIDS Helpline was subsequently inundated by callers querying the validity of his statement.⁹

The syndrome of silence is typical of the conventional functioning of public life. In most public spheres we are required to adopt the language of equilibrium; the raw edges of suffering and chaos must be suppressed or denied in order to ensure "safety and security". This is particularly true in the political sphere, where denial seems to be an integral part of political strategy. Consequently, our speech corresponds with the "normalities" of a self-deceptive culture in which everything must be seen to be functional, and which may never depict frailty and brokenness. Language that upholds this culture of denial becomes mundane and unimaginative: It dare not criticize the raw reality of the status quo; dare not be revolutionary and dangerous.

3. Preaching as Language of Hope

3.1 Reclaiming the Language of Lament

How, then, should this institutionalized "denialism" be countered? The reality of AIDS surely calls for a *public outcry*, an indignant shattering of the silence (cf. Ackermann 1996:55 ff). All people who suffer cry out – it is a creaturely and instinctive reaction. The fact that we may formalize this cry into language does not stifle its intensity, but rather underlines the human quality of this *language of suffering*. When we utter the language of suffering, we add to the instinctive and primal cry the reflections of self-conscious human beings and formulate the most basic of human questions: *Why? And How long?*

How should the church react to the reality of AIDS? I believe it is the task of the church, and therefore also of preachers, to supply language that gives form to the primal,

⁷ Science (2000), 'SOUTH AFRICA: AIDS Researchers Decry Mbeki's Views on HIV', Vol. 288. No. 5466, pp. 590-591, 28th April; BBC.co.uk (2000), 'Controversy Dogs AIDS Forum', 10 July.

⁸ *Sunday Herald* (18th June 2006), 'Apartheid might be over, but the struggle goes on'.

⁹ IOL, (2006) 'Zuma Showered to Reduce HIV Risk', 5th April.

human outcry. The significance of this language lies in the fact that it gives voice to suffering; in it suffering is given the dignity of language. But more: With this language we protest against the absurdity of suffering, and, theologically speaking, we confirm that we have all been created in the image of God, and that suffering is not what God willed for his created image.

The church knows, or should know, this language all too well: It is the *language of lament*. It is a language that we need to reclaim, for it has to a large extent been negated in Christian faith and worship. If we contend that preaching is a language of hope, we will have to re-learn the language of lament. There can be no language of hope without language of lament: They are flip sides of the same coin: "*But it is an illusion to suppose or to postulate that there could be a relationship with God in which there was only praise and never lamentation*" (Westermann 1974:27). Praise, which results from hope, can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation.

The language of lament is more than a public outcry – however justified that may also be. It is more than psychological or religious self-pity. It is a voicing of suffering of individuals or a community within the community of believers, in the presence of God. Ackermann formulates this movingly: "*Lament is more than railing against suffering, breast-beating or a confession of guilt. It is a coil of suffering and hope, awareness and memory, anger and relief, desires for vengeance, forgiveness and healing. It is our way of bearing the unbearable, both individually and communally. It is a wailing of the human soul, a barrage of tears, reproaches, petitions, praise and hopes which beat against the heart of God. It is, in essence, supremely human*" (2001:26).

Lament beats against God's heart. There is a lot of beating to be done. As long as there is one AIDS sufferer, it is one too many. As long as there is one AIDS orphan, we should cry out. As long as there is one AIDS death, we must protest. As long as there is any form of suffering whatsoever, the church needs to beat with an aching heart against God's heart. Lament needs to take the place of lethargy.

The Bible, of course, is no stranger to lament. In both the Old and New Testaments we find lament to be part and parcel of the people of God's way of worship, even of the core of their relationship with God: "*In both the Old and New Testament the lament is a very natural part of human life; in the Psalter it is an important and inescapable component of worship and of the language of worship. In the Old Testament there is not a single line which would forbid lamentation or which would express the idea that lamentation had no place in a healthy and good relationship with God. But I also know of no text in the New Testament which would prevent the Christian from lamenting or which would express the idea that faith in Christ excluded lamentation from man's relationship with God*" (Westermann 1974:25).

In Israel's worship lament takes on a set form. Basically it is constituted of a reality that causes distress, a cry of distress, a hearkening (promise of deliverance), deliverance and a response of those saved (the praise of God). Lament is always related to the saving acts of God; it too belongs to the events of the deliverance (Westermann 1974:21).

In crying out to God human beings are revealed in all their finiteness and frailty, and never idealized or spiritualized. Lament corrects a false or naïve view of faith. It does not represent a failure of faith, but an act of faith. It knows no cheap answers and quick fixes. It does not cover up the rawness of reality, but describes it "as it is" (Ackermann 2001:16). It does not romanticize God's involvement in our lives; does not settle for a God "*who is covered with a sugar-coated veneer of religious optimism whose omnipotence will 'make everything right in the end'*" (Ackermann 2001:27-28). God is not sanitized and removed from

the ugliness of suffering. On the contrary, He is viewed as intimately involved in our suffering (cf. further 3.2).

The question then arises: If lament is indeed part and parcel of the biblical dialogue between God and humans, why has it been so greatly reduced and censored in our preaching and worship? A number of reasons could be listed:

- Perhaps we still suffer from a form of *Greek Stoicism*, an unspoken belief that Christians “should not complain”. The latter has indeed been an ethos pervading Christian thought for many centuries, even to the point where complaint and lack of faith have been typified as synonymous;
- Or, could it be a result of our *success-driven society*, in which weakness and failure, and therefore lament, can have no place? Arbuckle contends that “*This is a thoroughly pathetic and frightening picture of a death-denying culture, for just as we seek to deny physical death, so also we are apt to ignore all kinds of painful personal and social loss. We have developed a pervasive mythology in which success is the hallmark of Western identity and failure or loss has no place in it*” (1991:44). Do we indeed find the mirror image of our society in a type of triumphant theology (*theologia triumphans*), which goes against the grain of a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*)?
- Perhaps it has a *soteriological background*, in the sense that the confession of sin has become the Christianized form of the lament, resulting in the receding of *suffering* in favour of (salvation from) *sin* in Christian dogmatics and in Christian worship (Westermann 1974:33). The believing (and saved) Christian should then no longer complain about suffering to God, but rather bear his or her suffering patiently. It is after all “of this world”, and therefore unimportant and insignificant. This, however, is a far cry from the cries of lament that we hear in the Bible;
- Homiletically speaking, the syndrome of silence could be linked to our tendency to neglect large portions of the Bible in our preaching, leaving us with an “ungepredigte Bibel”, as Bohren, one of the founders of the Societas Homiletica, reminded us more than thirty years ago (1974: Vorwort). We select “fitting texts” for our pet themes. In the process we miss out on the richness and variety of biblical language, and end up with highly abbreviated and censored preaching and liturgies. But when the text becomes silent we follow suit: Our pulpits serve the purposes of the syndrome of silence. Bohren stresses the fact that the Bible provides us with the “mother language” for preaching, taught by the Spirit through the Bible as “school of the Spirit” to perpetually inform and enrich our preaching (1974:113). We especially need to revisit and retrieve the language of lament, if we hope to find language of hope, also in the devastating context of HIV and AIDS. “*We are challenged*”, says Denise Ackermann, “*by the lack of an effective language to deal with HIV and stigma. Stigma is nourished by silence. Internalized trauma, fear of rejection, cultural restraints and wrong understandings of sin and punishment, all rob people of their power to name their reality... The scriptures have given us a language that can deal with suffering. In the ancient language of lament, we have a way of naming the unnameable and crying out to God and naming situations that are unbearable*” (in Paterson 2005:14);
- Perhaps our silence not only emanates from our selective use of texts, but also from our reduction of the dynamics of the texts that we *do* use. It is of paramount importance that we do not fall into the trap of extracting “messages” from biblical texts without being informed by the inherent dynamics, the rhetorical strategies, the “moods and movements” of the text, etc. (cf. Cilliers 2004:104-108). According to Westermann, we stifle texts exactly because we ignore the living dialogue going on within them, and rather

deduce and construct “dogmas of salvation” from them (1976:59). Dogmas of salvation have the potential of changing God’s compassion into a list of objectified and timeless “characteristics of God”, which leaves little room for the raw outcry of lament;

- Could it be that a misunderstanding of Christian “patience” tempts us into silence in the face of suffering? But surely, nowhere in the New Testament do we find a muzzling of lament. In the paraenetic sections of the New Testament letters we do find the admonition to bear suffering with patience and humble self-resignation, but the present-day exclusion of lament from our religious life should not be traced back to this (Westermann 1974:25);
- Perhaps the reason why lament is so neglected is, ultimately, because it presupposes certain *God images* with which we feel uncomfortable. Brueggemann (1997:317-403) is of the opinion that certain psalms, for instance, are homiletic no-go areas for exactly this reason. As counter-testimonies or cross-examinations of Israel’s core testimony, they reveal sides of Jahwe that hardly fit in with conventional theological and sermonic language. They speak of the *hiddenness, ambiguity and negativity of God*. We choose not to preach on this, because we do not understand that we need these images of God, held in tension with others, if we are to make sense of reality with all its experiences of disorientation, chaos and death.

And so we could go on. It would indeed be an interesting exercise to trace in more detail the reasons for the demise of the lament in contemporary worship services!

To summarize: The language of lament articulates those feelings and experiences on the edges of our existence, feelings and experiences of liminality that disrupt our equilibrium and shatters our mediocrity, and kindle in us a longing for transcendence. Using this language, we can speak out in an honest and liberating manner about the rawness of life, in contrast to conventional speech which is often nothing else but a linguistic cover-up. The uniqueness of the language of lament lies in the fact that through it we address God, even if it is an abrasive and argumentative way of protesting against that which caused the lament.

3.2 Rediscovering the Language of Hope

The language of lament, however, is never a goal in itself. Creation is groaning (lamenting) in expectancy of the rebirth of creation (Rom 8:22). It is, as has been said, not an expression of self-pity. It is a groaning for grace and a grieving for change. It has an address. It grapples with God for the sake of God, clings to God against God, even if He remains the incomprehensible One. It holds God to his covenantal promises: *“The genre of lament and the tradition of arguing with God, both firmly established in the Jewish tradition of prayer, have everything to do with holding God to the promises of the covenant. But lament goes further in incorporating into prayer accusation or complaint against God in protest, anger, or anguish, precisely because the present situation seems incompatible with the covenant”* (Hilkert 1999:43). Lament calls upon God to remember and to act accordingly, or rather, to act in a new and surprising manner. *The language of lament reconfigures the past in view of a new future. Therefore it can also be called a language of hope.*

This language of hope articulates the conviction: Things *can* change. Often in the psalms this conviction forms the hinge (“but”; *waw* adversative; cf. Westermann 1974:26) on which the whole psalm turns. It does not necessarily turn from lament to praise on the grounds of (already) changed circumstances. It rather *anticipates* change. It praises God even while still being in the depths. It grasps towards the future and, in doing so, protests against what is not yet. In this sense it is subversive speech, dangerous and restless, critical

of structures and powers that oppose the envisaged change. *“Naming grief is an integral part in the process of preaching hope...because the first step toward overcoming suffering is finding a language that leads one out of the prison of silence. A form of good news is to be found already in the language of lament and tears”* (Hilkert 1999:44).

The language of lament becomes language of hope because it not only *describes* what is; it also *evokes* into being what is not until it has been spoken. This language invites us not only to be *discerning* about what has been, but also boldly *anticipatory* about what may be (Brueggemann 1986:28-29). Within its tears already lurks a new tomorrow.

It is a remarkable fact that all of the psalms turn from lament to praise, expressing a freshly founded hope. The possible exception is Psalm 88. The latter does not end with a “Hallelujah!” or an “Amen!”, but rather with a gloomy conviction:

*Why, O Lord do you reject me;
why hide from me your face?
I am afflicted and in agony from my youth;
I am dazed with the burden of your dread.
Your furies have swept over me;
your terrors have cut me off.
They encompass me like water all the day;
on all sides they close in on me.
Companion and neighbor you have taken away from me;
my only friend is darkness (15-19).*

There is a grim progression, or rather, regression, into darkness and seemingly hopelessness. All that the psalmist can do is wait. Brueggemann captures this somber mood and movement of the psalm eloquently: *“The last word in the psalm is darkness. The last word is darkness. The last theological word here is darkness. Nothing works. Nothing is changed. Nothing is resolved. All things deny life... So what is one to do about that? Wait”* (1984:80).

But what on earth is this psalm – sometimes called an “embarrassment for traditional faith”, revealing the so-called sub-standard faith of the author – then doing in the Bible? It is in the Bible because it captures human emotions and experiences of grief, alienation and rage as few other texts do. It is realism-to-the-bone. Stripped of everything, perhaps suffering from a disease since childhood, the psalmist’s only hope lies in the thrice mentioned Name of God (2, 10, 14). It is a psalm filled with nameless suffering... but still God’s Name is there. God is completely absent, but completely present in his Name. Grappling with this absent, present One, the language of hope is born on the lips of the psalmist. This language knows about empty spaces, gaps devoid of divinity, where God seemingly is not, and where he has become silent.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kierkegaard understood this grappling with the God of the gaps, this paradox of the absent present One, this yearning for the inaudible voice of the silent speaker whom we call God, when he prayed:

Father in heaven! You speak to humans in many ways: You, to whom all wisdom and intellect belongs, You wish to make Yourself conceivable to us anew. Oh, and also when You remain silent, then You still indeed speak to us; because also He who speaks sometimes remains silent to give his children the opportunity to have their say; also He that speaks sometimes remains silent to test his beloveds; also He who speaks sometimes remains silent to make the moment of understanding so much more profound when it comes. Father in heaven, is this not so? Oh, the time of silence, when a person stands alone and deserted, because we do not hear Your voice, then we feel that the separation will be forever. Oh, the time of silence, when a person thirsts in the desert, because we do not hear Your voice, and it seems as though we

It is understandable therefore that the language of hope does not come to rest only, or primarily, when *things* do change. Prayer is never understood in the Bible as a primary source for getting things. The language of hope finds its fulfilment in God Himself, when He enters the gaps and fills the voids, when He acts as judge over the lamenter's situation. Herein lies the hopeful character of lamentation: It calls upon God's judgment, for divine exoneration. The irony is that the church's reaction to AIDS has not only been one of silence, but, on the contrary, also of condemnation.¹¹ As a matter of fact, the twin, evil brother of stigmatization seems to be condemnation – the spoken or unspoken belief of knowing exactly how God feels and should feel, acts and should act – also in regard to AIDS.

Of course, the language of lamentation-in-hope does not shy away from acknowledging God's Judgment. On the contrary, it faces it, calls for it, and anticipates it. It is exactly here that the limitations of human language, also as expression of hope, become painfully evident. Here we encounter the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: Not only, or primarily, do we lament the disorientation of life, but God does so, before we do. *God's lament precedes and supercedes our lament*. God saw his creation suffering – and lamented (cf. Genesis 6:5-7). God saw Israel bending under their slavery in Egypt – and lamented (cf. Exodus 2:23-25). In Christ, God saw the crowds milling around as without a shepherd – and lamented (Matthew 9:36). On the cross, this divine lament reaches its peak, or rather, its pit: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46).

The lament of God becomes exceedingly bitter when it becomes clear that He will have to judge his people – because He knows it will not leave Him without scars. Nowhere in the Bible is God portrayed as a king dealing with an issue at some distance. He does not even

have been entirely forgotten! Father in heaven, then it is but a short pause in the coherence of the dialogue between You and us. So allow this also to be blessed, this silence of Yours, like every word of Yours to us. Do not let us forget that You also then speak, when You are silent; give us this consolation: That you remain silent out of love, just as You also speak out of love, so that now, whether You are silent and whether You speak, You are still the same Father, who acts with the same Fatherliness, whether you now lead us through Your voice, and whether You now teach us with Your silence (1949:210).

¹¹ Being judgmental can of course take on many forms and be manifested in varied degrees, from harsh condemnation to subtle hints. An interesting example of an effort to integrate God's judgment and compassion theologically is found in the question whether AIDS is not God's third great judgment over humanity, besides the judgment in the garden of Eden and the Flood (cf. Van der Walt 2004:8). A chilling example of a rather harsh form of condemnation is found in David Chilton's account (1978:41-42) of his encounter with a reporter. It explains his theological understanding of the relationship between sin and judgment in no unclear terms:

"A few years ago, when I worked with the Institute for Christian Economics, a reporter for a national Christian magazine called. He was polling economists and economic writers around the country, asking us a single question: 'If you could change only one government policy in order to pull us out of our economic problems, what would that change be?'

'That's easy,' I said. 'Stop killing babies...'

'Wait a minute,' he said exasperated. 'What has abortion got to do with our economic problems?'

'Maybe that's the real problem,' I replied. 'Here you are, a writer for a respected Christian publication, and you don't get the connection between (a) the legalized murder of one and a half million people every year, and (b) the fact that God is selling us into economic bondage to other nations. It's called Divine Judgment...'"

He minces no words in applying this causal relationship between judgment and sin to people suffering from AIDS:

"The homosexual is at war with God, and, in his every practice, is denying God's natural order and law... That is why God's 'righteous judgment' regarding homosexuals in this age remains the same as in the Old Testament era – and they themselves are aware of it, yet rush on headlong into their perversion..." (1978:39).

send a subordinate to cope with the problem, or does not issue an edict designed to alleviate the suffering. God does not view suffering from the outside, as through a window. He sees it from the inside, relates to it internally, enters into it fully and makes it his own. In this way He overcomes it (cf. Fretheim 1984:128). *Herein, in the fact that God laments, lies the hopeful character of our lament.*

God acts upon his own lament – with judgment and compassion. This juxtaposition of God’s judgment and his grief is incomprehensible: The God of wrath is also the God who mourns. This says so much about God’s relationship to his creation, to people. It opens up possibilities for suffering people to hold on to this incomprehensible God, the One who judges and mourns. In some unfathomable way, it comforts them to know that God judges mournfully, to reveal his compassion, to overcome the suffering.

There is no dichotomy here, no false alternative between judgment and compassion. In the church’s approach to AIDS, however, this dichotomy often becomes evident. Either we respond in a judgmental manner, devoid of all compassion, or we dilute God’s compassion to romantic sentimentalism. In God’s lament, judgment and compassion are one. We see this already in the Old Testament. When God calls for an offer to be brought, He Himself is in the blood (life) of the offer: *“If all life belongs to God, then it may be said that God gives of himself to make forgiveness possible. In some sense God’s life is expended for the sake of the life of the people”* (Fretheim 1984:138-139). God creates a new life, a new beginning, through a *via dolorosa* – which he sets upon Himself. When Jesus cries out in his utmost anguish (Hebrews 5:7), we are reminded of the sound of a sacrificial lamb, taking the last gasp of air, a cry of anxiety and asphyxiation, when its throat is cut. With this last breath God breathes his compassion over us; hope is breathed into us.

Again, there is no dichotomy here: God judges – to be compassionate. His judgment is nothing other than his wounded love (Berkhof 1973:132). When He judges us, He simultaneously embraces us with his love. God does not “will” suffering. He wills to suffer with us. No one suffers more under God’s way of reigning than Himself (Jager 1959:25). This is the tremendous and fascinating mystery that we spoke about – difficult, if not impossible, for us to fathom.¹²

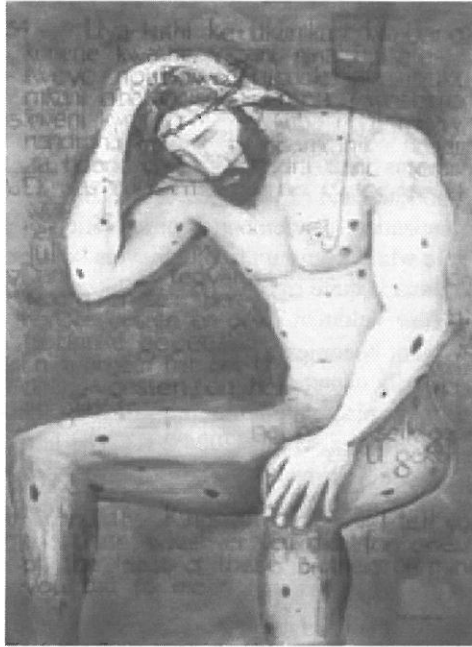
God’s compassionate judgment in Christ reminds one of the controversial painting by W Maxwell Lawton, called *Man of Sorrows: Christ with AIDS*. The artist thought that the concept of the “Man of Sorrows” was as old as Isaiah and reinforced by the New Testament. But when he linked the ancient image of the “suffering Christ” or Christ as the “man of sorrows” with the modern plight of persons living with AIDS, the resulting painting sparked a furor.

Lawton, who has AIDS himself, painted the image during a visit to South Africa as artist-in-residence at St. George’s Anglican Cathedral in the Diocese of Cape Town. He recalls sitting on the side of the hospital bed in exactly the same position as the figure on the painting, and seeing a vision of Christ doing the same. He painted the picture as a symbol of hope for all AIDS sufferers.

Critics charged that the picture, which shows Christ, covered with lesions and hooked to intravenous and oxygen tubes, was blasphemous. Some threatened to destroy it. An interesting fact is that it was specifically people who understood AIDS to be a judgment of God

¹² John Searle quotes the incident when 96 football fans were crushed to death and 200 injured in March 1989, at Sheffield’s Hillsborough Stadium. A surgeon at one of the hospitals to which the casualties were taken, spoke to the anxious parents of some of the young victims of the disaster. He read the names of those who had died and expressed his sympathy, saying that as a Christian he believed God understood their grief and was with them in their need. One father replied bitterly: *“What does God know about losing a son?”* (2003:264).

who leveled the fiercest criticism at the painting. Others, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu of the Province of Southern Africa and the local leaders of other denominations, defended the painting as both effective and theologically correct. Tutu said the painting challenged people to think about their faith and their conception of Jesus, and that victims of AIDS should be welcomed into the church and not isolated and excluded (cf. Cilliers 2006:111-112).



To summarize: Through the language of lament we grieve and learn to relinquish all perceived forms of human restoration. This opens up the space for the language of hope to be born, a language that anticipates a new beginning beyond all human endeavors. It invokes God to step in, on the grounds of his covenantal faithfulness. It is a language that broadens our horizons, spells out alternatives, holds forth unthought-of possibilities – as portrayed in the biblical text. The language of hope is dangerous and restless, as it challenges conventional answers and criticizes the status quo. It is revolutionary and radical, not impressed by cover-ups. It yearns for true and deep transformation, and is celebratory in its vision of the perceived transformation.

3.3 Re-learning the Language of Community

The language of lament, and therefore of hope, only becomes meaningful within the community. *“The purpose of the lament is the creation and restoration of the member of the community by the action of the group. The function is rehabilitation/restoration and the form serves that function... It is this form which enhances experience and brings it to articulation and also limits the experience of suffering so that it can be received and coped with according to the perspectives, perceptions, and resources of the community”* (Brueggemann 1977:264-265).

Although many of the psalms of lament articulate the suffering of individuals, both these and the national laments of Israel are imbedded in the community of worshippers. The psalms of lament underline the holistic anthropology of the Old Testament – always including psychological, social and theological components. It articulates the needs of individuals within the community in their relationship to God. “*For the lamenter it is not merely the isolated ‘I’ that is threatened by the power of death which he experiences in suffering; threatened as well is his standing in the community, that is, what he means to others and what they mean to him. But also threatened is his relationship with God and with it the meaning of his life*” (Westermann 1974:27-28).

AIDS is a communal issue, par excellence. It is not only a biological issue, but also a cultural, socio-economic, political, gender and poverty issue (cf. Smith 2005:17 ff). In the Christian sense of the word, it is also a congregational issue. If one member of the body suffers, the whole body suffers (1 Corinthians 12:26). It is within this one body that the compassion of God should be articulated, embodied and experienced. If the church responds to people living with Aids with silence, stigmatization, condemnation or superficial sentimentality, instead of “compassionate solidarity”, the whole community of believers becomes “infected” (cf. Koopstad 2004:27). Denise Ackermann is quite right when she contends that the church, as body of Christ, has AIDS (2001:5; cf. also Veldman 2005:102 ff.).

When the language of lament becomes the language of hope within the community of believers, *things* do not necessarily change, but *people* do. AIDS is indeed also a behavioral issue, and formation of faith takes place in communities of faith. There is a distinctive relationship between liturgy and ethics (cf. Müller 2004:2 ff). The latter must, however, never be understood in a moralistic fashion, especially within the framework of the liturgy. In the liturgy we rather celebrate that which is voiced in the language of hope, namely the reality, but also anticipation of a new beginning. But more than this: We rehearse a life concomitant with this new beginning and new order. Liturgy in this sense represents a process that conditions members of the community to certain habits, orientations and perceptions (cf. Hauerwas 1989:95). This always takes place within a specific social context or ethical locality that invites us to an alternative vision and a new act of compassion. We learn to envisage and articulate this context and locality in the light of our hope for a new beginning. In the liturgy our way of praying, our way of believing, our way of living in community, and our way of acting come together (*lex orandi – lex credendi – lex convivendi – lex bene operandi*; cf. Wainwright 1991:604).

The language of community is the language of hospitality. Lamenting and hoping are not exclusive, religious acts, meant for a few selected “insiders”. When a preacher and a congregation lament, it is a symbolically opening of the arms in a gesture of invitation to all of creation that suffers to join in. In this process the language of hope is born, exactly for and through those that understand what lament means, for and through the marginalized and stigmatized, the weak and failing. A congregation that excludes these lamenters-in-hope will never fully understand the depths of lament, nor the peaks of hope. To the extent that we understand what “we” means, we will understand what “hope” entails.

Preachers can only learn to articulate “we” correctly within the inclusive community of lamenters-in-hope. If our sermons exclude the marginalized and stigmatized in any way, be it through rhetoric and theology, gesture or silence, they can never understand nor articulate the language of hope. Sermons need those that suffer, if they are to suffer with those that need; they foster hope only to the extent that they embrace the hopeless.

In summary: "Worship services must be regarded as such locations where a common moral language is learned, where bad habits are unlearned, where responsible people are formed and where an ethics of being and character is cultivated, articulated, narrated and celebrated" (Müller 2004:4). The language of lament and hope find its ethical formation within the celebration of the community. The liturgy offers spaces, practices and structures within which this language can be learned and rehearsed through repetition, ritual and participation. It also opens up spaces where the marginalized and stigmatized are fully incorporated, if it hopes to understand hope. Preaching takes place within these spaces and contributes towards the movement from lament to hope.

4. Homiletic Implications

The learning of a language of lament, hope and community within the context of AIDS has decisive implications for preaching within the Christian Church. Below are but a few that could be briefly mentioned:

- First, the context of AIDS serves as a *homiletic reality check and unmasking agent* on different levels. To begin with, the language of lament reveals our chronic inability to address the context of where the raw nerves are suffered; in spite of our almost perfect church institutions and growing perfection in theological methodology, we still experience the silence of God Himself (cf. Bohren 1974:38-43). He is silent because we fail to speak up within the contexts that matter, and where He is to be found. But the unmasking goes deeper: The language of hope reveals our lack of faith in a true, new beginning, our hesitation to dare believe that God can fill the voids, that He can act in a surprising, never-thought-of manner. Our conventional pulpit language painfully reveals the deficiency of our language of hope. AIDS has unmasked some of our deepest theological shortcomings and abbreviated God images. And it does not end here: The language of community unveils our tendency to individualize, our inability to incorporate the body of Christ meaningfully into the sermonic process.
- Second, the context of AIDS reminds us of the *cathartic and heuristic character* of the preaching event. Already the fact that AIDS is no longer kept silent but openly named could have a far-reaching pastoral impact on those suffering. Naming is a first step towards healing. But preaching should not only name the reality of suffering; it should also name the reality of hope within suffering. Ultimately it should name God within suffering, calling upon his Name as the only Reality on which hope can rest. In this sense also, preaching indeed is *Namenrede* (Bohren 1974:89 ff). The catharsis should furthermore take place in the collective space of the community; it is a catharsis from suffering in isolation to suffering as member of the body of Christ, and thus suffering as body of Christ. In this sense preaching can function as a heuristic device that provides a space within which people can grow in communion towards a new hope. It names suffering, names hope and names those that suffer in hope.
- Third, with respect to our *hermeneutics*, one cannot but agree heartily with Gillian Paterson's diagnosis: "*The Bible, of course, is a foundational resource. Nevertheless, until recent years it has been communicated and interpreted exclusively by white, Western male scholars. It has often been used to support stigmatizing attitudes and practices within the church, and to increase the stigmatization of the vulnerable and marginalized. But in the birth, the life, the healing ministry, the death and the resurrection of Christ, we find the ultimate rejection of stigmatization. The AIDS-related stigma summons us to 'read' the Bible in the same way as it summons us to 'read' the context, namely from the standpoint of the excluded. It summons us to approach Scriptures with*

eyes that are willing to see and identify with the poor, the women, the disabled, the foreigners, the widows and orphans, the slaves, the colonized, and those who have been cast out of community on account of disease or mental illness. It summons us to ensure that the Bible is freed to function as a liberating and healing text, not a tool of exclusion and oppression" (2005:11).

- Fourth, and in conjunction with the abovementioned, with respect to our *rediscovery of the "lost texts" of Scripture*, we need to rediscover "lost testimonies" of the Bible. Themes such as lament and hope, judgment and compassion must be revisited with new anticipation – if we are to salvage our sermons from the conventional flattening, trivializing and domestication of the biblical text. Our tendency to pervert texts intended for the community of believers into individualized speeches must be replaced by a new language, by the "we" of community. In this sense, the language of Scripture must inform and transform the language from our pulpits, reclaiming the dangerous, restless and subversive character of the *verbum alienum*, the strange Word of God. Language like the latter is imaginative, permitting people to enter into new and alternative worlds. It is shattering and evocative speech that subverts the status quo, in this regard also the status quo of silence, stigmatization and condemnation.
- Fifth, we need to revisit our understanding of the *office and identity of the preacher*. The role of the preacher as *mediator* comes strongly into play when we consider preaching as an event that takes place in a context of AIDS. The lament of the mediator is a personal lament, but also one which deals with matters concerning the nation. In this sense the mediator does not only or necessarily bring his or her suffering before God, but, through mediation, the suffering of a whole nation. Old Testament examples of these mediatory lamenters would be people such as Moses, Eliza, Jeremiah, the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, and in continuation and as goal of this, the lament of Jesus on behalf of the world. As a matter of fact, the lament of the mediator forms the clearest connection between the Old and the New Testaments (cf. Westermann 1974:34-35, 36). Hilkert formulates this as follows: "Clearly one of the roles of the preacher is to enable the community to connect their grief and their God, their frustration and their faith, their rage and their redeemer" (1999:44).
- Sixth, we need to re-integrate the sermon within the *liturgy*. We need to be reminded of the fact that preaching is not all that takes place within the worship service – important as it may be. When addressing a contextual issue such as AIDS, the liturgy offers links and settings for the ritual embodiment and enactment of that what was preached in the sermon. The sermon need not, indeed cannot, do everything on its own, and should be freed from its *liturgical isolation* – especially in the Reformed tradition. The creative collaboration of sermon and liturgy also prevents the latter from slipping into an easy and predictable pattern. Liturgy acts as a critical sounding board, and the challenge would be to create liturgies, inclusive of the sermon, which enfold the rich diversity and potential of the complex, disturbing, and liberating testimony of the Biblical text.
- Seventh, we need to re-evaluate our understanding of the *Eucharist*. Practically all of the themes that we have touched upon so far find their condensation in the Eucharist. It is precisely at the table of the Lord that we see, hear, touch, taste and smell lament, hope and communion. Gathered around the tokens of broken bread and poured wine, the broken, damaged, abused and stigmatized bodies of individual sufferers and the broken body of the community are taken up into the body of Christ. Here lament becomes hope, hope for a new community. Preaching without the "visual sermon" of the Eucharist is

poorer because of it.¹³ AIDS reminds us that homiletics and sacramentology cannot and should not be separated, and that the language of lament, hope and communion need constant condensation and verification by means of the sacrament.

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¹³ This comment is made against the background of the Reformed tradition in which the Lord's Supper is often celebrated only four or five times a year.

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