

A memorable Sunday@Six

**The litany of lament grows loud and long:
The pulse of faith grows stronger once more.**

“Beware the Ides of March” was the soothsayer’s message to Caesar, warning of his death, familiar to many from their school studies of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Not that in 1601 the expression was anything more than the usual way of saying “March 15th”!

The twenty of us who came out that evening will now have an additional long-lasting association, of the shared experience that was a memorable Sunday@Six. Two of the things that differentiate church services is how much of them you can remember, and how much they influence your thoughts and life afterwards, and the service led by Julia Reid and Michael Paterson scored highly on both counts. Everyone there will recall different aspects that illuminate their path – I for one will certainly look at my daily Psalm differently as a result – and it will have an ongoing impact on many.

“Embracing Lament in Lent” had been billed as a service in which we would be encouraged to “cry out to the Lord our God”, using some of the lamenting psalms to share our sorrows, grief, pain, regrets and complaints with God. Michael and Julia led us with an inspirational combination of music, recitation, stories and video clips, intermingled with prayer and periods of quiet. This report includes just a few examples.

Michael told of an occasion when he was quietly praying in a church and was interrupted by someone who came in, thumped the communion table, and called God to account. We learnt that it’s all right to be angry – God understands. In the Psalms David openly expressed anger or frustration with God, yet God did not give up on David, and we too can trust in his unfailing love.

In an activity that Julia gave us, we chose pieces of paper on which to record our prayers to God, with different colours and headings:

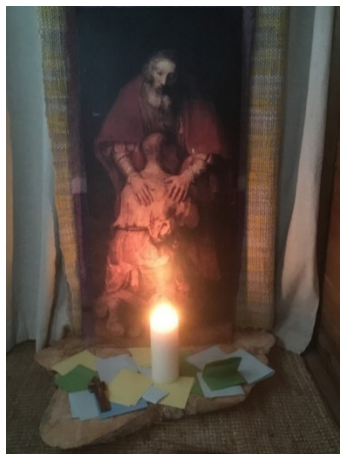
I want you to know God that I am not happy about ...

It’s just not fair Lord that ...

Save me God from ...

I need you God because ...

When completed, we brought these back, laid them on the table, and lit a candle of hope.



These personal and confidential prayers were later taken away by Michael. As shown in our photograph, they lie in his chapel before Rembrandt's "Merciful Father" (part of his 1668 painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son"). Here they will be prayed over by Michael, though remaining unread, until Easter Day, when the papers will be turned to ashes by the Easter Fire. Who says that symbolic acts have no power?!

Many who come from a tradition of a monthly cycle of Psalms, and heard of the *weekly* cycle that had been Michael's early experience might feel that perhaps this was too much psalmody. Appropriately the psalm for Night Prayer on that Monday night outside the South African Embassy in the 'Release Mandela' vigil was Psalm 69 "Save me O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck"! We gained an understanding that the Psalms reflect different experiences and that, at any given time, for each of the psalms, there will be people around the world to whom that psalm speaks.

We learnt some new words, too. The Hebrew tune *Leoni*, familiar as the setting of "The God of Abraham praise" was a modern setting of Psalm 143, which ended with a wonderful prayer for guidance:

"Because I trust in you
and offer you my prayer,
let me, when morning comes, discern
your loving care.
My heart is set on you;
this earnest plea I make,
that you will show the road my life
is meant to take."

Two other hymns framed the service, which started with "O God you search me and you know me", based on Psalm 139 (Singing the Faith 728), and ended with the metrical version of Psalm 121 "I to the hills will lift mine eyes". With hindsight, given that the service turned to be the last gathering for worship in the church for the immediate future, it was so appropriate that our last words were:

"The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall
preserve thee from all ill.
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will."

While Julia and Michael developed their thoughts independently, it's another example of God's coincidences. This is the year that the Church Mission Society have been offering "Lament for Lent – only with eyes that have cried" – a weekly devotional resource "to give us a chance to let the unsaid out ... and to discover how we can genuinely be there for each other when things aren't fine." How much this is needed in today's coronavirus-hit world!