Simply grieving

By MacKenzie Scott

September 13, 2010

Any national leader who would willingly engage in war when other alternatives exist should read Curzio Malaparte's *Kaputt*. The author was an Italian journalist assigned to cover campaigns by Axis allies. He wrote a "secret history" of his life amid the carnage and cruelty of war. It is a poetic, personal perspective.

One thing that makes the book effective is Malaparte's selection of scenes and victims, from dead horses to individual Jews unable to escape their doom. He is sophisticated, even debonair, but his stylish writing only enhances the disgust and sorrow. It is as if the terrible scenes he witnessed were given an appointed chronicler so that war's shameful destruction might be stripped of political cant or romantic pretense—and so that the lost might be properly mourned.

One problem with photos and video is that they come to the viewer relatively undigested. Images of the Twin Towers struck by jetliners, or of tortured and humiliated prisoners at Abu Ghraib, haunt people with their horror. People need guidance in how to express their sadness, fear and anger. In our time political commentators are supplying that guidance, and the misery of human inhumanity becomes ammunition for argument.

It seems there is no time simply to weep over the wrong of the world. The public's instinct that we have a share in victims' suffering doesn't find a fit way to grieve just for them.

Jeremiah has plenty of political purpose in his pronouncements, but he knows enough to admit his inability to mourn adequately —"would that I could cry a river!"—and to spend time sorrowing over those slain by war before drawing morals. He has been so impatient of fools and bold in denunciation that it gives his deep anguish all the more impact. Like Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, Jeremiah betrays a tenderheartedness and sympathy with human vulnerability not always evident in God's self-revelation.

Psalm 79 is another lament over slaughtered people and a defeated nation. The psalmist asks when God's anger will be averted—and if it can't be turned on those who humiliated God's people. The extent of the judgment is more than one generation can have deserved, so the psalmist asks that forebears be forgiven as well as his own time and people. God's compassion is invoked, and God's purpose in having a people to bear his name is recalled, with the hope that God will rescue them for God's sake if not their own.

The psalm, in its tentative hints of causes for tragedy, goes farther than Jeremiah. It remains poetry, however, and the evocative and suggestive power of its poetry keep the psalmist's efforts at sense-making from seeming presumptuous. Several things come to mind—the anger of God, the sin of the people, the puzzling failure of the manifestly equally sinful enemy to suffer anything comparable—but it is more like thinking aloud than building a case.

Grieving itself, with its mixture of consternation and indignation, puzzlement and pain, is response enough. Like Jeremiah, the psalmist is reacting, and upholding the place of mourning by not feeling obliged to solve problems or suggest policy. One hopes that further developments, influenced by God, will come soon. Now is a time to cry.

For all its religious rhetoric, our time is less persuaded that events are in God's hands. Suggesting that there is merit in grieving all by itself, that there is healing in lamentation and perspective in despair, runs counter to the grain of our culture and our time.

Such a suggestion could, however, chase the phantoms of our self-reliance and remind people of faith of the obligations and opportunities that exist in calling and waiting on God. A world impatient with recourse to prayer would have to ask itself if our efforts—fearing, blaming, killing, torturing and intimidating people—have really proved better solutions to the shocks and sorrows of our time.

Additional lectionary columns by Scott appear in the September 7 issue of the Century—*click here to subscribe.*