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Tamar's cry: Re-reading an ancient text in the midst of a contemporary pandemic

ABSTRACT

In a first section, the story of Tamar is read from a woman's perspective, in a meditative, literary and canonical manner. In a second section, and against the backdrop of seeing HIV and AIDS in South Africa as "a gendered pandemic," theological reflections are suggested that could contribute in the search for resistance and hope in the face of this bleak reality.

INTRODUCTION

The central themes in this paper are violence against women, HIV and AIDS and poverty. I re-read the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 in a meditative, literary and canonical manner. The second half of this paper is then devoted to the search for clues of resistance and hope in the midst of the "bleak immensity" of AIDS. In several theological reflections the text is brought into conversation with the context from which I speak. These reflections aim merely to introduce certain theological themes for the churches in South Africa to pursue as they struggle with their role in combating the AIDS pandemic.¹

I turn to Tamar's story to look for possible clues on how the Body of Christ² can find its way through the present ravages of sickness and death. Attending funerals every weekend is a numbing task. It is more than numbing when the church as the Body of Christ itself feels amputated as its members fill coffins. There are no dividing lines between the Body and some other reality "out there". We too are infected. The church today has AIDS.

RE-READING AN ANCIENT TEXT: THE STORY OF TAMAR, 2 SAMUEL 13:1-22

This literary reading of the Tamar story is done self-consciously from a woman's perspective.³ Women have distinctive questions about and insights into the biblical texts derived from our life

1 See also my paper on "Seeing HIV and AIDS as engendered pandemic" for background to the present reflections.

2 Throughout this paper "Body of Christ" is used as the metaphor for the church. This is done intentionally because the organic nature of this metaphor is important for the argument that when one member suffers all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12:26). Thus the church with AIDS is the church universal.

3 This literary reading of the text draws, *inter alia*, on the work of the Dutch biblical scholar Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, see Mieke Bal, Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and Grietje van Gineken, *En Sara in Haar Tent Lachte: Patriarchaat en Verzet in Bijbelverhalen* (Utrecht, HES Uitgevers, 1984). See also Phyllis Trible, in particular *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984).

experiences. We know that the Bible, as the source book of our faith, is a powerful means for defining women's place in society and that it has been invoked to justify women's subordination to men. So our readings are suspicious, critical and questioning as we seek meaning for life. We also, in Teresa Okure's words "read from this place". "Reading from this place" is about the relationship between the biblical text and the social location of the interpreter. Okure continues:

By *social location* I understand the sum total of those human experiences that shape the lives of the persons connected with the Bible at three levels: (1) the level of peoples in and of the Bible itself ... the primary level; (2) the level of the biblical authors and their respective audiences at various epochs of history, the secondary level; and (3) the level of readers/interpreters of the Bible throughout the course of history up to the present day, the tertiary level ... By *interpreter* I understand simply anybody who reads/hears the text with a view to deriving from it a meaning for life.⁴

My reading of the Tamar text is "from this place", my place, a place in which the "bleak immensity" of violence against the bodies of women and children, now haunted by the spectre of HIV and AIDS, rages on. "My place" is also one that knows that the bible is the book of the church and that believes that in the biblical texts, despite their cultural, social and gendered baggage, it is possible to discern interpretations that affirm God's intention that we may have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10). Furthermore, my reading "from this place" is tempered by an acute awareness of the gendered nature of the HIV and AIDS crisis in which women and children are too often the victims. At the same time it is also a reading that seeks hope and affirmation for life.

The story in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 is well known yet seldom preached.⁵ King David's son Amnon falls in love with his beautiful half-sister Tamar. He is tormented (sick) and consults his friend Jonabab, a "very clever man". They hatch a plan. Amnon pretends that he is sick, and at his request David sends Tamar to him to make cakes "in his sight". He refuses to eat the cakes, sends the servants away, and asks Tamar to bring the cakes "into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand". She does so, he grabs her hand and says "Come lie with me, my sister". She resists: "No my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel". But Amnon will not listen, he is stronger than Tamar and he rapes her. Once the deed is done, Amnon is "seized with a great loathing for her" and he says: "Get out!" Tamar protests at her treatment. Again Amnon is deaf to her entreaties, calls a servant and instructs him to "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her". This is done and Tamar puts ashes on her head, goes away and "remains a desolate woman in her brother Absalom's house". Later we learn that Absalom kills Amnon as revenge for Tamar's rape.

Such are the bare bones of this rapacious tale. Its truths are multiple, conflicting and resistant to being read as a simple story of a rape. It is a text that echoes through the ages and that resonates with women's experiences today in a number of ways. But first to Tamar, a victim of rape, betrayal and abandonment. She is the obedient daughter who pays a price in a patriarchal clan. She does as she is told; she obeys her father and serves her "sick" brother. When she realises what is about to

4 Teresa Okure, "Reading from this place: Some problems and prospects" in F F Segovia and M A Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995), p 52.

5 In 1999 I conducted research for a workshop on homiletics and found that of the 84 people interviewed (which included clergy and lay people), only one had heard a sermon on this text.

happen to her, she cries out: “No, my brother, do not force me; *for such a thing is not done in Israel*” (my italics). The immorality and injustice of the violation is more than just hers. It is a shame on the name of Israel. Her words are honest and poignant. While they acknowledge female servitude, they speak of a moral vision that is tragically in contrast with that of Amnon.

Tamar is not only a victim of rape. She is betrayed by her family, raped and then despised. She is no longer “my sister”, but “this woman”. Amnon ends up hating her.⁶ His love for his sister is a disordered love driven by morbid desire. Once the rape is committed, he is confronted by his own morbidity mirrored to him in the tragic figure of his victim. This he cannot bear and she is “put out” of his presence. She is also a victim of her father’s abdication of his responsibility as king and as father. There is no record of him responding to this outrage with an appropriate punishment. In fact, he will not punish Amnon “because he loved him, for he was his firstborn”. David does not even react to Tamar’s plight personally. The house of David, tainted by David’s adultery with Bathsheba, is now fouled by incestuous violence. She is also a victim of her brother Absalom’s plans for revenge when she is co-opted by him into concealing them – “Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” These words may be understood as consoling. They may also conceal his plans for revenge. He and not Tamar will take the law into his own hands.

For us it is clear that the process of concealment is being reactivated. This is to ensure that the victim is made silent. The word used to describe Tamar’s fate means: abandoned, alone, despised [my translation].⁷

Finally, she is cast out. We last hear of her as remaining in Absalom’s house “a desolate woman”. Condemned to a quiet life of despair and desolation, her social and spiritual needs are not acknowledged or addressed and she disappears into the mists of history. In 2 Samuel 14:27 reference is made to Absalom’s daughter Tamar “she was a beautiful woman”. Can there be an element of restitution here for Tamar in the next generation of women in the house of David? In summary, Tamar lives in a world where men manipulate and coerce by using their power and in which her life is ruined by events she has no control over. Amnon uses his male power and privilege to destroy. In societies where the silence on sexual violence is not broken, abuse of power is not held accountable. David abrogates the proper use of power and opts for expediency rather than justice. Absalom’s wish for revenge is problematic, for it expresses his sense of being offended more than it shows concern for the victim. Revenge is easier to indulge in than sharing the pain of the victim. I agree with James Poling that “The latent message of this story is that sexual violence against women is not about the humanity of women but about power between men”.⁸ Finally, there is no restitution or justice for Tamar.

The brutal rape in this text speaks stridently into “my place”. Rape, incest and violence are endemic in South Africa.⁹ Human Rights Watch/Africa’s *Report on Violence against Women in*

6 According to Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p 47, the repetition in this passage emphasises the hatred focused on Tamar.

“*Then-hated-her Amnon a-hatred great indeed (me’od). Truly (ki) great(er) the-hatred which he-hated-her than-the-desire which he-desired-her*”.

7 Bal *et al*, *En Sara*, p 57.

8 James N Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1991), p 158.

9 See Jane Bennett, “Gender-based violence in South Africa”, *Africa Gender Institute Newsletter*, University of Cape Town, Vol 6, May 2000.

South Africa states: “What is certain ... is that South African women, living in one of the most violent countries in the world, are disproportionately likely to be victims of that violence”.¹⁰ Commenting on the fact that South African women constitute 30 percent of members of parliament, an achievement which places us in the top ten of the world’s democracies, Professor Amina Mama of the Africa Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town continues:

Yet South Africa is simultaneously topping another chart, as one of the world’s most deadly environments for women. Statistical evidence tells us that [in] post-apartheid, South African women are more likely to be murdered, raped or mutilated than women anywhere else in the democratic world, including the rest of Africa. Their assailants are not foreign invading armies demonstrating conquest, or even members of “other” racial groups in the still divided post-apartheid locales of the new nation. They are South African men, most often the very men with whom South African women live in intimate relationships.¹¹

Unlike domestic violence which cuts across all barriers,¹² recorded victims of rape are mostly concentrated among poor and disadvantaged women in South Africa.¹³ While acknowledging that all women are potential rape victims, poor women in this country are more vulnerable to rape than are those coming from the privileged classes. This is not surprising, as poor women do not have private transportation, need to walk long distances and live in areas plagued by crime, gangsterism, overcrowding and poverty and, in order to work, are often required to leave and return home in the dark.¹⁴

Victims of rape and indecent assault are deserted by a criminal justice system that is not able to bring offenders to book.¹⁵ This leads to people taking the law into their own hands. Revenge killings are occurring with increasing frequency. Our landscape is strewn with the wounded and

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- 10 Human Rights Watch/Africa, *Report on Violence against Women in South Africa* (New York, Human Rights Watch, 1995), p 44.
 - 11 Amina Mama, “Transformation thwarted: Gender-based violence in Africa’s new democracies”, *Africa Gender Institute Newsletter*, University of Cape Town, vol 6, May 2000.
 - 12 See Mmatshilo Motsei, *Detection of Woman Battering in Health Care Settings: The Case of Alexandra Health Clinic*, Women’s Health Project, paper no 30, January 1993, p 5, who states that contrary to conventional wisdom, research has shown that “the perpetrators of violence against women include men who hold respectable jobs and positions in society ... These include lawyers, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, priests and business executives.” Furthermore, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) found in a study of inquest records that every six days at least one woman is killed by her partner and that more than half of all women murdered are killed by a partner or a male friend (*The Star*, 21 November 1995).
 - 13 Human Rights Watch/Africa 1995, 52.
 - 14 Accurate statistics on rape are notoriously difficult to come by and for the last year we have had a police imposed prohibition on the disclosure of all crime statistics. In 1998, 49,280 rapes were reported to the South African Police. These figures exclude cases of sexual assault (4851) and incest (179) only because our definition of rape is very limited. Since January 2000, 31,780 child rape and attempted rape cases have been reported to the South African Police. According to Rape Crisis, Cape Town, approximately 1 in 20 rapes is reported thus approximately 985,600 rapes occurred in 1998. Recently this has been exacerbated by the widespread and insanely sick belief that if a man has sexual relations with a virgin he will be cured of HIV and AIDS. The consequences of this obscenity are that girl children, even babies, are being raped as a “cure” for HIV and AIDS.
 - 15 The report by the Human Rights Watch /Africa (November 1995) deals at length with the largely inadequate state response to violence against women.

dying bodies of victims of violence.¹⁶ We have our Tamars, our Amnons, our Davids and our Absaloms.¹⁷ So far the lines drawn from the Tamar text to the South African context have highlighted abuse and rape. How does the Tamar story relate to the present HIV and AIDS pandemic?

The AIDS pandemic is a gendered pandemic.¹⁸ Women who are HIV positive are at the receiving end of stigma, social ostracism and violence. Countless women in South Africa who are HIV positive have, like Tamar, been the victims of sexual violence, perpetrated within a cultural order in which power is abused and women are used for male purposes. The results? Once their status has been verified, they are often ostracised. Tamar knew what it was like to be soiled goods, a status conferred on her by the abuse of power in a patriarchal order.

Tamar's cry, "for such a thing is not done in Israel" is ignored. In a patriarchal system women's cries of distress are insufficiently heard and they often disappear under a veil of silence. Breaking the silence about one's status can be life-threatening.

Re-reading the story of Tamar I feel affirmed by its truth. This biblical text "says it as it is". Women's vulnerability to abuse is unflinchingly portrayed. It speaks truth into "my place". While poverty is not Tamar's lot, this text names the evil: our human proclivity for abuse of power. It appears to leave us with little hope. But does it really? Tamar's cry, "for such a thing is not done in Israel" is a cry of resistance. The very fact that this woman's voice is heard in this text in this manner, is unusual enough to leave some ground for hope, slim as it may be. The quirky power of Scripture to uncover new ways of seeing, to point to less obvious paths and to evoke hope when despair seems the only legitimate reaction, can allow clues for resistance and hope¹⁹ to slip through this reading that could assist the churches as they struggle to find a way forward in this present crisis.

THE TAMAR TEXT: CLUES FOR RESISTANCE AND HOPE

Tamar's story "says it as it is". Why is this important? There is no prevarication, no avoidance of the horror, no cover up. Miroslav Volf speaks about "the geography of sin" and "the ideology of sin".²⁰ In the case of Tamar "the geography of sin" is the scene of the crime in which her violated body is at the centre. "The ideology of sin" is the context backed by aeons of patriarchal traditions

16 See Betsi Pendry, "The links between gender violence and HIV AND AIDS", *Agenda* 39, 1998, 30-33. See also Whiteside and Sunter, *AIDS*, p 58.

17 As a sample, see Anne Mager, "Sexuality, fertility and male power", *Agenda* 28, 1996, 12-24; Promise Mthembu, "A positive view", *Agenda* 39, 1998, 26-30. At its core the problem is not simply that rape occurs or that women and children experience violence and fear in the arena of sexuality. Ours is a society that is redolent with patriarchal attitudes and practices. The problem is not just that a man raped his half-sister (incest), though this is serious enough. The problem is not just that rape, incest and violence against women are all too common. Years of counselling and collecting anecdotal evidence has shown me that, in my context, the problem is that many perpetrators they do not think they have committed rape and do not recognise the difference between ordinary heterosexual activity and sexual violence. The social construction of heterosexual activity is largely based on patterns of dominance and submission in which men are expected to be dominant and women are expected to be submissive.

18 See my "Seeing HIV and AIDS: A gendered pandemic" elsewhere in this volume.

19 The remainder of this paper employs a hermeneutics of resistance and hope as the Tamar text is woven through the theological themes that follow.

20 Miroslav Volf, "Original crime, primal care" in L Lamp man (ed), *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999), pp 28-29.

and practices that result in women's status being secondary to that of the male in familial relations. Saying it as it is, is the place to begin. What would it take for the churches to accept responsibility publicly for our role in the promotion and maintenance of gender inequality (the ideology of sin) and when will we make the link between this woeful tradition and the present deadly impact of HIV and AIDS on the lives of women and men (the geography of sin)? Positively put, the churches can begin to deal with the present erosion of sexual morality with its devastating consequences for women and children, by esteeming women, our entire being, our bodies, our status and our humanity, in every respect, as well as by speaking out unambiguously about the reasons for the present scourge of HIV and AIDS.

Once the Body of Christ is able to make the connection between power, gender relations, poverty and HIV and AIDS within its own infected Body, the question then is: What will it take for the Body of Christ to be a body that can bring hope to those living with HIV and AIDS? Given the existing conflicting models for being church, I suggest that a common starting point is found in our creeds. What does it mean to confess to being "one, holy, catholic and apostolic"²¹ church in the midst of this HIV and AIDS crisis?

These statements are made in faith and are integral components of the confession of the triune God. As the church acquires its existence through the activity of Christ, the marks of the church are, in the first instance, marks of Christ's activity. Unity of the church lies in Christ's unifying activity. Holiness is not initially ours but is the holiness of Christ who acts on sinners. Catholicity is really about the limitless lordship of Christ. Apostolicity refers to Christ's mission in the Spirit. Seen in this way these confessions of faith are statements of hope – indicators of the new creation of all in Christ.²² They are also statements of action. If we are truly *one*, we are the church with HIV and AIDS. People living with HIV and AIDS are found in every sector of society, rich and poor and every church denomination. We are all related; what affects one member of the Body of Christ affects us all (1 Cor 12:26). We are all living with HIV and AIDS. There is no "us" and "them". We dare not forget that inclusion, not exclusion is the way of grace. If we are *holy*, we are not living some superhuman mode of existence. "Holiness does not require a transcendence of our human condition, but a full utilisation of our condition toward the concrete reality of love".²³ Holiness is not withdrawal from the smell of crisis, but engagement, often risky, in situations where God is present. If we are *catholic*, we are in solidarity because we are connected, in communion, with those who are suffering and who experience fear of rejection, poverty and death. If we are *apostolic*, we stand in continuity with the church in its infancy and we strive to live as Ignatius of Antioch put it, "in the manner of the apostles".²⁴ This means that we are true to the heart of our confession, that we are zealous for the Word and that we continuously examine the ideals of the early church and measure ourselves against them. This is nothing new. It is no more than a call to put the words we mouth in the creeds into practice. Clearly we all fall short in this regard. The marks of the church do, however, offer solid, practical guidelines for measuring our actions as members of this one universal Body, a Body infected with viruses struggling to live faithfully.

21 Taken from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed 381, while the Apostles' Creed speaks of "one, holy, catholic church".

22 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), pp 338-339.

23 Marjorie Schlock, "Holiness and a renewed church" in L M Russell (ed.), *The Church with AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p 115.

24 Quoted from Robert Schreiter, "Marks of the church in times of transformation", in Russell, *The Church with Aids*, p.131.

1. The power of the narrative

Tamar's story raises the issue of the power of the narrative. Human beings cannot survive without a narrative identity.²⁵ Telling stories is intrinsic to claiming one's identity and in this process finding impulses for hope. For those living with HIV and AIDS there is a need to claim and to name their identities in order to move away from the victim status so often thrust upon them. The narrative has a further function.²⁶ Apart from claiming identity and naming the evil, the narrative has a sense-making function. The very act of telling the story is an act of making sense of an often incomprehensible situation, of a suffering and chaotic world in which people wrestle with understanding and in so doing seek to experience relief.

The stories of people living with HIV and AIDS are not only stories of suffering. They are also stories of triumph, of resistance and of hope. Stories need to be heard in communities of faith. Churches can offer a supportive and empathetic environment for story-telling in the search for meaning. "The self-narrative is an individual's account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time, a way of connecting coherently the events of one's own life," writes Joan Laird.²⁷ Stories, she continues, are "to be thought of as narratives within the narrative".²⁸ The stories of people living with HIV and AIDS are individual tales within the meta-narrative of the pandemic. Hearing and engaging with these stories in communities of faith has the potential to draw members into relationship. We all have stories to tell. As our stories intersect, they change. We become part of one another's stories. In this process, we are all changed. Hearing and telling stories begins a process of openness, vulnerability and mutual engagement that challenges stigmas, ostracisation and the loneliness of suffering and hopefully leads to acts of engagement, affirmation and care. Most importantly, narrative has the power to break the silences surrounding this crisis and to give it a human face.

The real meta-narrative is *the* story of our faith: the story of the God of Israel acting to create and redeem culminating in the ministry, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Story telling becomes a two way conversation – hearing stories of suffering and triumph, and retelling *the* story of suffering and triumph in our communities of faith. The intersecting of our life stories with the Jesus story is our ultimate hope.

2. Embodiment

The HI-virus enters, lurks, then makes forays into the immune system until ultimately it destroys the body. This pandemic is all about bodies. Unfortunately, "... in spite of doctrines of incarnation, resurrection, and *imago Dei*, and theories about the ingestion of the very body of Christ in the mass, both the Catholic and Protestant Churches, perhaps especially during some of the modern centuries, have conceived their principal domain as that of the soul and its salvation," writes William LaFleur.²⁹ Thankfully, the Tamar story is a tale about embodiment. This text challenges

25 Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1999), p. 34.

26 I am grateful to Bernard Latagan for pointing out that the narrative has the further hermeneutical function of sense-making, an understanding he attributes to the work of Jörn Rüsen's concept of *Sinnbildung*.

27 Joan Laird, "Women and stories: Re-storying women's self-constructions" in M McGoldrick, C M Anderson and F Walsh (eds.), *Women and Families: A framework for Family Therapy* (New York/London, W W Norton, 1991), p 430.

28 *Ibid.*, p 133.

29 William R LaFleur, "Body" in M C Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), p 41

the recurring Christian refrain that the body is secondary to the soul and that the material is less praiseworthy than the spiritual. Our social reality is an embodied reality. In Elaine Graham's words, "The effects and dynamics of power, truth, reason, good and evil never exist as transcendent ideals; they remain to be embodied, enacted, performed in human communities as forms of bodily practice."³⁰ Our bodies are more than skin, bone and flesh. Our bodies encompass the totality of our human experience, our thoughts, our emotions, our needs and memories, our ability to imagine and to dream, our experiences of pain, pleasure, power and difference, as well as our beliefs and our hopes. Ethicist Christine Gudorf reminds us that the body is synonymous with the self. "The mind is not over and against the body but rather is part of it, as are the emotions."³¹ Our bodies are, in fact, the intricate tracery of all that is ourselves. Again in Graham's words, "... embodiment is more than an 'issue' exciting our compassion; rather, it points us to the performative, incarnational nature of all theology. Bodily *praxis* is the agent and the vehicle of divine reality and the faith practices of the Body of Christ are 'sacraments' of suffering and redemption."³² The Tamar text opens up the issue of the body and challenges any thoughts of separating soul and body, mind and emotions.

For women and children who are infected, the body is at the centre of political, social and religious struggles. This is hardly surprising. The female body has, for instance, been the subject of ridicule, adulation, envy, discrimination, abuse and stigma. The question of stigma is particularly relevant to persons suffering from HIV and AIDS. Ignorance, prejudice, stereotypes, issues of power and dominance all conspire to stigmatise sufferers and in so doing to label them and to distort their true identities. You simply become "an HIV positive", a statistic whose identity is now subsumed in your status. This denies the active, meaningful and contributing lives led by increasing numbers of HIV positive people. Erving Goffman's influential theory of stigma points to the link between stigmas and assumed identities. He asserts that stigmas are specially constructed relationships.

Historically, stigmas were imposed on individuals in the form of physical marking or branding to disgrace them. In modern societies, however, stigmas arise through social processes of interaction whereby individuals are marked or segregated because of an attribute they possess or because of something discrediting known about them. Hence stigmatized identities emerge through interpersonal interactions rather than as a psychological reaction to events ... The mere existence of stigma ensures that social interactions between stigmatized and non-stigmatized persons are usually uncomfortable, tense, and frustrating.³³

Goffman's work on "stigmatized identities" refers to the disabled. Yet it strikes profound cords in our context. Women who are known to be HIV positive are stigmatised by a large section of South African society. Tamar's cry is a poignant reminder of what happens when stigmas prevail. Fortunately, within the body of people living with HIV and AIDS there is an increasing band of people who are slowly

30 Elaine Graham, 'Words made flesh: Embodiment and practical theology', paper read at the International Academy for Practical Theology's Biennial Conference, Seoul, Korea, 1997.

31 In Anne B Gilson, "Embodiment" in L M Russell, and J S Clarkson (eds.), *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), p 82.

32 Graham, "Words made flesh".

33 Quoted from Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1994), p 59-60.

gaining power by defining their experiences and claiming their reality, speaking out and breaking the silence around the disease. There is also a new brand of social activism emerging in South Africa, as bodies march in the streets demanding affordable treatment for HIV and AIDS.³⁴

When, on the one hand, the body is seen merely as a vehicle for the soul or, on the other, as some kind of a trap, it has been maltreated, vilified and abused. This is an important clue for the churches to seize in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. Bodies are at the centre of this crisis, sick, poor and too often women and children's bodies. The Gospel demands embodied acts of care, comfort, support and acceptance.

3. Ethical codes

Tamar's cry, "for such a thing is not done in Israel" raises the issue of the ethical codes of a people. She does not only cry out for the protection of her own body, but for the honour of her people. Her people are God's people. In reality, her cry is a cry to God. It is a cry for the integrity of life. It is a cry of resistance against the disordered and morbid nature of Amnon's love and a cry for love expressed in relations of trust and respect.

In South Africa today there is much talk, and very necessary talk, about abstinence, prevention and medication in the face of the HIV and AIDS crisis. The Roman Catholics say abstinence is the only answer. The Anglicans say yes, but if you must, use condoms. There is very little being said, however, about the moral and ethical issues raised by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. So far the churches have not grasped this nettle. The recognition that the Body of Christ is a community of sexual human beings³⁵ is slow in coming and centuries of ignoring any matter related to human sexuality is merely feeding the silences around HIV and AIDS. It simply is not good enough merely to preach fidelity and abstinence in sexual relations. This message cannot be heard, understood or followed as long as it is communicated without a properly constructed debate on what constitutes a moral community. Moral choices and moral accountability and a community in which women are respected as equal partners in the church itself, are essential to this debate.

What makes a moral community? Christian ethics are communal ethics. How people live with one another, and our faithfulness to God are two sides of the same coin. In Amnon's world the people of Israel received the law, according to Rowan Williams, "when God had already established relations with them, when they were already beginning to be a community bound by faithfulness to God and to each other".³⁶ Williams continues:

When the Old Testament prophets announce God's judgement on the people, they don't primarily complain about the breaking of specific rules (though they can do this in some contexts) or about failure to live up to a moral ideal; they denounce those actions that signify a breaking of the covenant with God and so the breaking of the bonds of faithfulness that preserve Israel as a people to whom God has given a vocation.³⁷

34 Here I have in mind the Treatment Action Campaign headed by the intrepid Zackie Achmat who though HIV positive, refused to take anti-retroviral drugs until recently. Now that it seems likely that such drugs will be available to all who need them in South Africa Achmat is on medication.

35 Peter Brown has documented the variety of ways in which Christians in late Antiquity found sexuality a problem. See his *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988).

36 Rowan Williams, "On making moral decisions". Unpublished address to Lambeth Plenary Session, Canterbury, July 22, 1998.

37 *Ibid.*

In the New Testament Paul deals with ethical dilemmas (for example, Rom 14 and 15, 1 Cor 10) by arguing that any decisions taken should be guided by the priority of the other person's advantage, by avoidance of judgmentalism and by acceptance of one another and thus by the ultimate imperative of building the Body of Christ more securely. For Christians, ethical actions flow from involvement in community with God and with one another. Actions which promote the good of another, are actions which are designed to be for the good of the Body of Christ.

How can the shaping of a moral community begin? Bernard Brady in his book *The Moral Bond of Community* has a chapter entitled "You don't have anything if you don't have stories". He writes: "Narratives form and inform our values, our dispositions and how we 'see the world'".³⁸ It is indeed possible to argue that narrative is *the* medium of moral communication. What is certain is that narrative is at the heart of our faith, a narrative which "sets up the conditions for the possibility of the moral life".³⁹ Instead of a negative ethic of human sexuality which consists only of injunctions on what not to do, people's stories can be countered with other stories – stories from our source book. Once the stories of the Bible and from our traditions interact with our own stories, then moral consciousness, the ability to distinguish the "is" from the "ought" and the choices this involves, can be nurtured. Acquiring moral agency does not separate "being" from "doing" or character from decision-making and action. To be a member of the Body of Christ means "the formation and transformation of personal moral identity in keeping with the faith identity of the community".⁴⁰

To put it differently, a moral community is one whose goal is the common good of all. Such a community upholds the integrity of life, values the dignity of the human person, includes those who are on the margins or excluded, while not avoiding the reality of structural sin. The moral claim is to "respect and enhance the integrity of life *before God*".⁴¹ The main task of a moral community is to nurture the moral capacities of its members, by story telling, by involvement in the work of justice and charity, by upholding the integrity of all life, affirmed by our liturgical practices. In this way the community becomes one of moral deliberation and praxis. "In both Jewish and Christian traditions, faith's truth is finally a 'performative' one."⁴² It becomes real when it is embodied. Moral truth and a way of life go hand in hand.

Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen in their book *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* tell the story of Dom Helder Camara meditating in the middle hours of the night about the attitudes of the rich towards the poor and then writing a poem. This poem speaks to those of us in the church who are not HIV positive and who may be tempted to feel virtuous about our status, perhaps even indifferent to those who are infected.

I pray incessantly
for the conversion
of the prodigal son's brother.
Ever in my ear

38 Bernard V Brady, *The Moral Bond of Community: Justice and Discourse in Christian Morality* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 1998), p 1.

39 *Ibid.*, p 22.

40 Bruce B Birch and Larry L Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1989), p 45.

41 William Schweiker, *Power Value and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age* (Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, p 1998), p 153. See also Cahill, *Catholic Ethicists*, p 286.

42 Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics*, p 137.

rings the dread warning
 “this one [the prodigal] has awoken
 from his life of sin.
 When will the other [the brother]
 awaken
 from his virtue?”⁴³

4. The language of lament

After Amnon evicts Tamar, she puts ashes on her head, rents her robe and goes away crying loudly. Alone, without comfort, discarded and abused, her plight is that of countless women and children through the ages. There is no language in this text to deal with the horror of Tamar’s experience, other than her cry. Fortunately there are resources in scripture that fill this lacuna. I suggest that the ancient language of lament offers a vehicle for expressing the raw emotions arising from situations such as Tamar’s.⁴⁴ The language of lament also offers the Body of Christ the opportunity to say: “We are suffering; we stand in solidarity with all who suffer; we lament while we believe that there is hope for all in the saving grace of Jesus Christ”.

What is lament? Lament is a form of mourning. It is also more. It is somehow more purposeful and more instinctive than mourning. Lamenting is both an individual and a communal act that signals that relationships have gone awry. While lamenting is about past events, it also has present and future dimensions. It acknowledges the brokenness of the present because of injustice and our role in contributing to the troubles of the world. It instinctively creates a link between healing and mourning that makes new just relationships possible in future. Lament is not utilitarian. It is as primal as the child’s need to cry. 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.⁴⁵ 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 that beat against the heart of God. It is, in essence, supremely human.

Once the wail is articulated, the lament usually takes on a structured form. This does not mean that lament should be tamed or domesticated but rather that it happens in spaces that are contained by liturgical boundaries and rhythms. Nevertheless, lamenting, however, remains risky speech. Walter Brueggemann acknowledges this, saying that it is “dangerous, restless speech”.⁴⁶ It is risky

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p 47.

⁴⁴ See also the following articles by me: “Lamenting tragedy from the other side” in James R Cochrane and Bastienne Klein (eds.), in *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society*, (Washington D.C., The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000); “Tales of terror and torment: Thoughts on boundaries and truth-telling”, *Scriptura*, 63, 1997, 425-433; “On hearing and lamenting: Faith and truth-telling” in H R Botman and R M Petersen (eds), *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation* (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 1996); “‘Take up a taunt song’: Women, lament and healing in South Africa” in Leny Lagerwerf (ed.) *Reconstruction: The WCC Assembly Harare 1998 and the Churches in Southern Africa* (Zoetermeer, Meinema, 1998).

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, “The shape for Old Testament theology: 11 Embrace of pain”. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, 400, describes lament as “a dramatic, rhetorical, liturgical act of speech which is irreversible”. It articulates the inarticulate. Tears become ideas.

⁴⁶ Brueggemann, “The shape”, 401.

because it calls into question structures of power, it calls for justice, it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with one another and with God beyond the limits of acceptability. It is a refusal to settle for the way things are. It is reminding God that the human situation is not as it should be and that God as the partner in the covenant must act. Lament is never an end in itself. It is undergirded by the hope that God not only can but that God *will* hear the cries of the suffering and the penitent and *will* act with mercy and compassion.

As HIV and AIDS decimates families and communities, the Body of Christ can find hope and comfort in the psalms whose undimmed quality comes to us through the ages, expressing the rawness of suffering as well as trust and hope in God. In Brueggemann's words: "Israel unflinchingly saw and affirmed that life as it comes, along with joy, is beset by hurt, betrayal, loneliness, disease, threat, anxiety, bewilderment, anger, hatred and anguish."⁴⁷ Israel also saw that lament and praise go hand in hand. On the one hand, the psalmists almost assault God with facts about the human condition. On the other hand, they reveal trust and confidence that God will deliver them.

When the language of lament becomes the language of the Body of Christ in circumstances of suffering it has a number of grave implications. First, it has important implications for the political and social witness of the churches and the impact of their message. The credibility in society of the churches as institutions that claim to be inclusive, caring communities is in doubt if they are not seen to lament the injustice of the patent lack of support from our government for those suffering from HIV and AIDS. Lamenting can be politically subversive and therefore dangerous as it is never about the preservation of the status quo.

Second, the language of lament can enrich our liturgies and our pastoral care. I have seen lament at work in St George's Cathedral in Cape Town where people faced one another across the racial divide, told their stories, wept and joined in prayers of petition and prayers. Then I understood why so many prayers of praise are impoverished. Too often praise is not praise that emerges from grappling with radical doubt about God's presence in the world and our disquiet about suffering. I also saw how painful memories, experiences of exclusion and stigmatisation must be brought into the open. They need to be told and, when words fail, the psalms offer a valuable resource for lament as they honour people's pain and offer hope. Hope is nurtured in community. When the community of faith joins in lamenting, the suffering person feels that her or his pain is validated. The locus of pain is shifted from the inner world of private suffering to the outer reality of the community of faith in a movement that is potentially cathartic.

Finally, the practice of lament can contribute to a more intimate and authentic relationship with God. People living with HIV and AIDS grapple with guilt, fear and anger. Death as judgment for sin weighs heavily on some. The ability to cry out to God, to lament sin and seek forgiveness as David (Ps 51) did, offers another way. Fear of the suffering associated with death from AIDS-related diseases is only human; anger at being a victim of infection raises legitimate questions about God, about justice and about God's presence and power in a suffering world. Is God's justice and care for us reliable and, if so, where is it? There is much cause for lament, yet its loss stifles our questions about evil in the world. Instead we settle for a God who is covered with a sugar-coated veneer of religious optimism whose omnipotence will "make everything right in the end". Religious optimism is deeply different to a life of faith which is unafraid to examine suffering but is nonetheless grounded on hope. Religious optimism prefers to sanitise God by removing God from the ugliness of evil and suffering. This is a God whom we dare not approach with our genuine

47 Walter Brueggemann, "From hurt to joy, from death to life", *Interpretation* 28, 1974, 4.

grief and with whom we are in a relationship of eternal infantilism. Prayers of lament that are direct, truthful about suffering, that name the unnameable to God, are powerful in their potential to heal our doubts and address our lack of trust and restore our faith in God's power to act on our cries. The church with AIDS must raise its voice in lament.

5. Life and death

As I have said, Tamar is lost in the mists of history and we do not know how she lived out her life. Her rape undoubtedly affected her quality of life and her ability to live abundantly. Discovering that one is infected, coping with subsequent opportunistic infections and finally with full blown AIDS, all challenge the quality of life of people living with HIV and AIDS. How to live productively and hopefully with the knowledge of premature death and then how to face imminent death, raise questions about the relationship between life and death that demand attention in the Body of Christ. What has the Good News to say to someone who is infected with HIV or who is dying of AIDS?

I suggest that the place to begin is to affirm that God is a lover of life, so much so, that life continues into eternity. Certainty about this comes from the promise of the resurrection of the body. Hope is the key to questions about life and death. Not "a pie in the sky when you die" kind of hope which is nothing more than the thin skin of religious optimism, but creative, imaginative, expectant and risky hope, maintained only with struggle. Hope is demanding, because we have to live our lives in such a way that that which we hope for, can come about. This kind of hope takes our confessed belief in "the life everlasting" as not only something for one day when I die, but as a confession of how I will live my life this day, in this moment. It is the kind of hope that enabled Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he took leave of a fellow prisoner in Flossenbürg concentration camp and went to his execution to say: "This is the end – for me the beginning of life".⁴⁸

Life, death and resurrection all belong together – they make up the whole of life. Resurrection cannot be reduced to "life after death" alone. When John (I Jn 3:14) writes, "We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love one another", he stresses that love is passionate about life, that we must say a hearty "Yes" to life, life which leads to death. What the resurrection of the body means is the subject of theological speculation; resurrection talk, however, remains body talk according to our creeds. Resurrection does not mean a deferred life – something we put off until after we die. In Moltmann's words: "I shall live *wholly* here, and die *wholly*, and rise *wholly* there."⁴⁹ Eternal life is all of me, all of everyone, all of creation, all healed, reconciled and completed. Nothing will be lost. Christian faith is shaped by the experience of the dying and the death of Christ and by his resurrection. The process of the resurrection of the dead begins in Christ and continues in the Spirit "the giver of life" and will be completed in the raising of all the dead.⁵⁰ So, I would say to the person dying of AIDS, "Death is not your end. *Every life remains before God forever.*" To be raised to eternal life means that nothing has been lost for God: "... not the pains of this life, and not in moments of happiness."⁵¹ Thus death both separates and unites. "Eternal life is the final healing of this life into the completed wholeness for which it is destined."⁵²

48 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, tr. M. Kohl (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), p xi.

49 *Ibid.*, p 67.

50 *Ibid.*, p 69.

51 *Ibid.*, p 71.

52 *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, there are Christians who believe that AIDS is God's punishment for sin. Susan Sontag in her interesting book *AIDS and its Metaphors*, says that "Plagues are invariably regarded as judgments on society ..." ⁵³ We are very quick to link any sexually transmitted disease with sin as if there are no innocent victims. Insensitive zealousness has resulted in persons dying of AIDS being told: "Your sin has caused your death." I am cautious, even suspicious of this language of fear. Despite those terrifying medieval pictures of judgment tempting women and men to seek comfort and salvation in the arms of the church, people have not stopped sinning. The mere mention of HIV and AIDS raises fear. It seeps into places where we did not know it before: Fear of sexuality, fear of bodily fluids, fear of the communion cup, as Sontag comments "fear of contaminated blood, whether Christ's or your neighbour's." ⁵⁴ (Not surprisingly, Nietzsche commented acerbically on what he called the "holy lie" – the invention of a God who punishes and rewards by holding out the after life as some sort of "great punishment machine". ⁵⁵ Death can be caused directly by sin. We kill one another. We are destroying our environment. But death is not God's ultimate judgment on us. Admittedly, Christian thinkers like Paul, the old church fathers and Augustine saw death as punishment for "the wages of sin". James (1:15) writes that "... then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when fully grown, gives birth to death". Undeniably death can be caused by sinful acts.

There are other traditions in Christianity that do not see death as a judgment on sin. Schleiermacher and liberal Protestant theology of the nineteenth century disputed the causal connection between sin and physical death. ⁵⁶ Moltmann argues that death may be called the "wages of sin" but that this can only be said of human beings. Angels are dubbed immortal but according to Peter (II Pet 2:4), they sinned! Animals, birds, fish and the trees don't sin, yet they die. Through human beings death has been brought into nonhuman creation. Death has been with us from the beginning. God's first commandment to human beings was "be fruitful and multiply". We were mortal right from the beginning. From a pastoral point of view, theological speculation about the relationship between sin and death is not particularly helpful for the person dying of AIDS.

The body is implicated in the process of sin. The very context in which we live is affected by sin. Innocence suffers. Everything that is "born" must die. It is part of our condition. Our responsibility is to live and to die in loving solidarity with that sighing and groaning community of creatures described by Paul (Rom 8:23), all waiting for "the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). ⁵⁷ We all need redemption. "The death of all the living is neither due to sin nor is it natural. It is a fact that evokes grief and longing for the future world and eternal life." ⁵⁸ We all await what Letty Russell calls "the mending of creation". ⁵⁹

53 Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), p 54.

54 *Ibid.*, p 73

55 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, Random House, 1967), p 90.

56 For an explanation of these views, see Moltmann, *The Coming*, p 87 and 89 ff who discusses Karl Barth's adaptation of Schleiermacher views.

57 Moltmann, *The Coming*, p 92, writes "The modern separation between person and nature (as in Schleiermacher) or between covenant and creation (as in Barth) does neither justice to human nature nor to the community of creation. It is an expression of the anthropocentrism of the modern world, an anthropocentrism destructive of nature ... The patristic church's doctrine of physical redemption was more comprehensive in its cosmic dimensions."

58 *Ibid.*, p 92.

59 This term is used by Letty Russell in many of her works to denote the eschatological implications of the Reign of God.

At the centre of our efforts to understand the link between life and death is Christ. For Paul, community with Christ, who is the subject of our hope, extends to the living and the dead. “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom 14:9). Moltmann reads this verse as follows:

I understand this in the following sense: In dying, Christ became the brother of the dying. In death, he became the brother of the dead. In his resurrection – as the One risen – he embraces the dead and the living,⁶⁰ and takes them with him on his way to the consummation of God’s kingdom.

As we struggle to understand what it means to live hopefully, we are reminded that life remains unfinished. We have tried to live according to the plan for our lives, but we have failed. We are wounded, incomplete, not yet the persons that God intends us to be. We mourn the death of those we love. We grieve precisely because we have loved. Yet, in grief we try to hold on to hope. There is no quick fix for those who suffer. Life in the midst of suffering and death is a constant struggle, it risks moments of despair and loss of trust and it seeks hope even in the darkest places.

6. Eucharist

So far my re-reading of the Tamar text has raised issues of honest awareness, narrative, embodiment, moral community, lament and issues of life and death. At heart, Tamar’s story is one that portrays what can happen when human relationships become corrupted. It is a story of failure and loss of hope as both Tamar and Amnon’s persons are violated, albeit in different ways. Yet, when it is read within the wider context of the canon, it is a story of resistance to abuse and to evil power, and an affirmation of the moral code of a people who knew the better way.

By grace, failure does not have the last word in the Christian life. Our hope is in Jesus Christ, the embodiment of our faith, whose life, death and resurrection we celebrate in the *Eucharist*.⁶¹ Michael Welker reminds us that the Eucharist was instituted “in the night that Jesus Christ was betrayed and handed over to the powers of this world.”⁶² Its origins do not lie in success or triumph but in the human betrayal of the Son and it is precisely here that we dare to hope. I want to conclude my search for clues with a few thoughts on how the Eucharist links up with the themes which I have already raised and how it offers hope in our present context.

At the outset of this paper I said that the Body of Christ has AIDS. I see a link between the violated body of Tamar, the abused bodies of women and children, the bodies of people living with HIV and AIDS and the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus Christ whom we remember and celebrate in the bread and the wine at the Eucharist. Deep inside the Body of Christ, the AIDS virus lurks and as we remember Christ’s sacrifice, we see in his very wounds the woundedness of his sisters and brothers who are infected and dying. Our hope is in Christ who takes the church as his bride, makes it his Body and through this nuptial act sets before us the possibility of relationships

60 Moltmann, *The Coming*, p 105.

61 See Moltmann, *The Church*, p 244, who discusses the different ways of naming the celebration and who chooses to call it the “Lord’s supper”, the term used by the ecumenical movement. See also Michael Welker, *What happens in Holy Communion?* tr. J F Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), pp 56-59 who argues that the supper is more than a “thanksgiving”. I shall use the term *Eucharist* for no other reason than that it is in keeping with my tradition.

62 Welker, *What Happens*, p 43.

in love which are the antithesis of the disordered and morbid expressions of love found in Tamar's story.

The Eucharist is the bodily practice of grace. Nancy Eiesland writes: "Receiving the Eucharist is a body practice of the church. The Eucharist as a central and constitutive practice of the church is a ritual of membership ... the Eucharist is a matter of bodily mediation of justice and an incorporation of hope."⁶³ Because God chose to live with us in the flesh, sacramentality takes physical reality very seriously.⁶⁴ We are bodily partakers of the physical elements of bread and wine, Christ's presence in our lives and in our world. The very bodiliness of the celebration of the Eucharist affirms the centrality of the body in the practice of the faith. "The Supper", writes Welker, "centres on a complex, sensuous process in which the risen and exalted Christ becomes present. The Supper gives Christians a form in which they can perceive the risen and exalted Christ with all their senses."⁶⁵

The celebration of the Eucharist makes the Reign of God present "to us" in the form of Christ's body broken "for us" and Christ's blood shed "for us". Christ invites us to the feast, and he is "both the giver of the feast and the gift itself".⁶⁶ In other words, the gift of the Reign of God is quite simply present in the person of Christ himself – Christ crucified and risen. Thus the communion meal mediates communion with the crucified one in the presence of the risen one. It becomes a foretaste of the messianic banquet of all human kind. It is the meal at which all are welcome. In Christ's Body, the Eucharist is *the* sacrament of equality. Only self-exclusion can keep one away. At the communion table we are offered the consummate step in forging an ethic of right relationship, across all our differences. "We who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread". This visible, unifying, bodily practice of relationship with all its potential for healing is ours. For the Eucharist to have meaning in our lives, we need to feel its powerful pull to the radical activity of loving relationships with those who are different. "The Eucharist involves a commitment (*sacramentum*) to sharing with the needy neighbour, for Jesus said, 'The Bread that I shall give is my own flesh; given for the life of the world' (Jn 6:51)".⁶⁷

A covenanted Eucharistic community is a community in relationship with one another and with God. Paul describes us as the Body of Christ, a body which though it has many members, is one body. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). It is a body in which the weakest are to be treated with respect for "... God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Cor 12:25). The picture here is one of solidarity in suffering, of mutual support and of a moral community in relationship with one another and with God.

Finally, much has been made of the text in I Cor 11:27-29, 31-32 about eating the bread and drinking the wine in an unworthy manner, about examining ourselves and about the threat of judgment. Welker comments, "... [then] the Supper is no longer a feast of reconciliation but rather an anxiety-producing means of moral gatekeeping. In a sad irony, the feast of unconditional

63 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, p 112.

64 Susan A Ross, "God's embodiment and women", in C M La Cugna (ed), *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1993), p 186.

65 Welker, *What Happens*, p 18.

66 Moltmann, *The Church*, p 250.

67 Duncan B Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 2000), p 96.

acceptance of human beings by God and among each other was misused for intrahuman moral control!”⁶⁸ There is a tension here. Welker points out that in the celebration of the Eucharist, God accepts us unconditionally, while at the same time Paul’s concern is that Christians celebrate the meal in accordance with the meal’s identity. Rightly so. How we partake of the Meal is deeply significant for how we live as a moral community. “The Eucharist may be understood as nourishment for moral growth and formation,”⁶⁹ writes Duncan Forrester. A community with a moral code and a moral identity partaking in a meal of grace, memory and new life, brings resistance to evil and hope for now and tomorrow for the church with HIV and AIDS.

TAMAR’S CRY

In conclusion, while conceding at the outset that the Tamar text did not give much apparent cause for hope, I have tried to find clues for resistance and hope that could be useful for church praxis in our present crisis. We live in what Edward Schillebeeckx terms a world that is an “enigmatic mixture of good and evil, of meaning and meaninglessness”.⁷⁰ In the midst of this bewildering mixture of experiences, there is the human capacity for indignation and moral outrage. Tamar’s cry “for such a thing is not done in Israel” allows us to find hope where there is little cause for it, enables us to say “yes” when all else shouts “no” and allows chinks of light to guide our feet in a context which, in John Chrysostom’s words, is “grazed thin by death”.⁷¹ We know what should “not be done in Israel”. “‘We know what to do’ is a formulation that takes us to the very heart of the scandal that is AIDS; it situates us on the frontier between hope and despair, between action and inertia, between those with the means to ‘do something’ and those who have little to ‘do’ but suffer”.⁷² HIV and AIDS is our *kairos*. It is a time when the ordinary rhythm of life is suspended. Will it be a time of doom or will we find a new unveiling of God’s presence and love for us here and now?

68 Welker, *What Happens*, p 70.

69 Forrester, *Truthful Action*, p 95.

70 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p 4.

71 John Chrysostom in *de Virginitate* 14.1 quoted from Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), p 6.

72 Trengove Jones, *Who Cares?*, p 7