

Sunday 27 September 2020

SONGS FROM A STRANGE LAND

Psalm 137: “Grief and rage”

Lord of all,

*we offer you this time of worship –
our praise,
our thanksgiving,
our confession,
our petition.*

Lord of all, hear our prayer.

As I come into God’s presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 96:1, 10-13

- ¹ O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
- ¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.”
- ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- ¹³ before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

How do you react in the face of defeat? Of course, defeat is not a concept we like to dwell on. We are taught to embrace victory, and so we should, for Jesus has won the greatest of victories! And yet in our own lives we must face the reality that, at times, that victory is far from our personal experience. In fact, the memory of that victory may intensify our own feelings of grief and failure.

As God’s Old Testament people faced the experience of exile they had to deal with many issues. Their own guilt and failure was one, but there was also those who had been instrumental in their downfall. Not only had the Babylonians destroyed the Temple, Jerusalem and the nation, they had done so with cruelty, malice and ridicule. The people had suffered, and now they were being laughed at, and not just by their captors, but also by neighbours who could have been expected to share some fellow feeling. How would you or I react?

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
- ³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
- ⁴ How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- ⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.
- ⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!”
- ⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
- ⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

Psalm 137:1–9 (NRSV)

This psalm, with the omission of the last part, has often been used in worship. However, the psalm in its entirety, including its shocking conclusion, has much to teach us about prayer, about ourselves, and about God. One thing it teaches us, is that in extreme situations, grief and anger are both inevitable and inseparable, and that the worst possible response to monstrous evil is to feel nothing.

There is no evidence that the psalmist acted out his desire for revenge. Rather, he expresses these feelings in prayer and apparently leaves them with God. So, the cycle of violence is broken by the psalmist’s honesty with God.

Psalm 137 is an invitation to a kind of prayer that is passionate in its utter honesty. To pray is to offer ourselves and our desires – anger as well as grief – to God and to know that God loves us as we are. We must acknowledge that we are no less vengeful than the psalmist was. But the good news is that God loves us and chooses to use us anyway. In this way, Psalm 137 points ultimately to forgiveness, and seen in the light of the Cross of Jesus, the desire for revenge gives way to God’s mission to save. Hate is replaced by hope.

In a deep sense, Psalm 137 is a Christian prayer. It can be an act of honesty that faces our own deepest and darkest emotions. It can be prayed for victims of every kind of injustice. We pause and pray now for those whose hearts and lives are full of grief and rage, even our own.

Pause and pray

Remembrance, which is at the heart of Psalm 137, is also at the heart of the Christian faith. A psalm about remembrance that both expresses the pain of death and harbours hope for life cannot help reminding us of the Lord's supper and Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Remembering Jesus' self-sacrifice is painful, for it must recall his death. But in remembering there is hope, for "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Lord of all

*touch my heart with your living presence
and fill my life with your grace,
so that my love for you may grow,
my faith be deepened,
and my service strengthened.*

Lord of all, hear my prayer,

in the name of Christ. Amen.