

“THE SONG OF THE EXILE”

Psalm 137

As some of you will know – because I keep banging on about it – I was born and brought up in Winchester, a beautiful cathedral city nestling among the rolling chalk hills of mid-Hampshire. It’s a wonderful place, even today, half a century after the time of my fondest memories – full of history and charm, set in countryside that is as quintessentially English as you can get, and immortalised in music and song by bands as diverse as The New Vaudeville Band (*Winchester Cathedral*) and Big Big Train (*Winchester from St Giles Hill*). The buildings are well preserved and the atmosphere is generally friendly, and it’s currently the most expensive place to live in England – although it does feature at Number 5 in *Crap Towns: The 50 Worst Places to Live in England*. I lived there, in the same house, just across the street from my grandparents, until I left school and went off to university – and my family had lived in the city for several generations. It was home. It was secure. It was everything you could want.

Then, as part of my university course, I went off to live in France and, because of a mix-up with my job application, I ended up in a town called Vierzon. Most people have never heard of it except as a place to get through as quickly as possible if you’re on your way south from Paris – and since I lived there they’ve built a motorway round it, so you don’t even have to drive through it any more. It’s a sprawling place on the flat plain of Central France and consists of an enormous railway station and marshalling yards, a couple of large tractor factories staffed by North Africans from France’s old empire (in whose hostel I lived for three months) and a technical college for industrial ceramicists where I ended up teaching English to their very reluctant students. There wasn’t any history to the place. It was ugly. And the people were, initially, very unfriendly – particularly the police, who needed to provide me with the appropriate papers. In the end, I got to like the industrial ugliness of it all, made some good friends, and it was handy for travelling from – the railway station was where the north-south and east-west lines crossed – but when I first arrived, I certainly felt like weeping.

Have you ever been in situation like that? If you have, you may be able to identify to some extent with the sentiments expressed in the Psalm we read a few moments ago. Admittedly, few, if any of us, here have actually been deported (although some of the older ones of you may have been evacuated during the war) and forced to live in a completely alien culture, but I’m sure some of you will have experienced that deep feeling of home-sickness when taken out of familiar and comforting surroundings.

Psalm 137 – immortalised for many of you, probably, through Boney M’s 1978 hit *By The Rivers of Babylon* – is a song which opens with a deep sense of pathos. The poet is looking back to the time of the exile of God’s people in Babylon and his mind is filled with memories of sorrow and torment. The people of Israel had been marched across the desert from Jerusalem – Zion – a small city on a craggy outcrop, a city set in the hilly and rocky terrain of a landscape that they all knew well, and which epitomised for them not only their national hopes but also their religious devotion. And they had ended up in the great sprawling city of Babylon, a place of strange customs and languages, a city set between the two great rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates, with a complex network of irrigation canals which linked them – the “*rivers of Babylon*”. It was awful and they wept for the city which they had left and never expected to see again.

On top of that, their new overlords – their “*tormentors*” – wanted them to entertain them with songs from their homeland, songs which they would normally have sung in the worship of their God, Yahweh. Contemporary friezes show pictures of the Babylonians beings entertained by their prisoners with songs and lyres. It was all too much for them and they hung their harps on the trees as an act of defiance: they would not entertain others with their worship.

Indeed, defiance is the theme of the next little section of three verses – vv4-6. Rather than “*sing the songs of the LORD in a strange land*”, the poet pledges his allegiance to his home city in extravagant terms. He would rather lose the ability to play his harp and sing at all if he forgets the city of Jerusalem. It’s a strange mix of nationalism and religious fervour, far beyond anything we are likely to experience ourselves – although some of the scenes in the United States in recent years have come close, it has to be said.

I wonder if we have the same sentiments about Lichfield, a city that is our home and whose cathedral is a symbol of the faith that we hold dear. I suppose the nearest contemporary equivalents are followers of Islam who have such a fondness for Mecca and the holy places of the Middle East; or Rastafarians where a fervent spirituality is linked to their African homeland. In our society that are those who follow those religions and consider themselves exiles in Britain – in fact, the Rastafarians even refer to England as Babylon.

We may not share any of these beliefs, but we can, to some extent maybe, sympathise with them. On a different level, we are, as followers of Jesus Christ, as the New Testament makes clear in several places, *“strangers and pilgrims”*, aliens in a sometimes hostile non-Christian culture, but that probably doesn't stir the same feelings within us. This is a Psalm of very deep emotions and sadness which must touch us all to a greater or lesser extent. So what do we make of the last stanza (vv7-9)? OK, we might even feel the odd twinge of nationalism (although we'd try and give it some sort of respect by calling it patriotism or support for Great Britain), but can we really identify with the terrifying climax of this song?

So far in our little excursion through the Psalms on these summer Sunday mornings, all the Psalms we've considered have been nice and safe, expressions of faith or of worship or of praise, couched in reverent and respectful terms. At the very worst they have described struggles with difficult life situations. But we cannot ignore passages like this, part of God's inspired word, we believe, and here for us to learn from, as the Apostle Paul tells his young friend Timothy. The sentiments expressed here seem to relate nationalistic feeling to actions that are more akin to the regime of the Taliban or the more extreme voices at the very edge of populist East European politics. In fact, there are descriptions of such things happening in Nazi camps during the Second World War as Jewish and handicapped babies were slaughtered.

How on earth can we square these bloodthirsty ideas with what we find in the rest of the Bible? How can we, as followers of Jesus Christ, who commanded us to love our enemies, countenance the thought of wishing our enemies' babies smashed against the rocks? The late Kenneth Leech described this Psalm as *“a lovely and vile Psalm”*. He went on to write about it as *“a mixture of loveliness and violence, of man's capacity to love his country, to cherish freedom above his chief joy ... leading to the vileness of unnecessary suffering and death.”*

We can be almost certain that this Psalm was never used in worship in the Temple – or later in the synagogue – there is no evidence of its use in the normal worship anyway. It seems to be a personal prayer, uttered from the depths of passion and anger by someone who is desperate for justice to be done, for the suffering and torment of his people to be avenged. Commentators are agreed that the prayer is an outpouring of emotion and there is certainly no reason to believe that the Psalmist of any other of God's people actually carried out this threat.

Taking our anger to God in prayer is certainly one way of dealing with it. There is no use denying that we all have to confront our emotions – in particular, our own angry and vindictive feelings. God can cope with that – we cannot harm him and prayer gives us an outlet for that, a way of sublimating our anger before it causes us to take action which could harm our fellow men and women. Suppressing anger can lead to bitterness, resentment and twisted personalities. It can even lead to physical problems in the lives of those who are constantly trying to hide their anger and frustration. Express your anger to God in prayer and let him soothe you and lead you into calmer pathways.

But, although that is part of the message of this Psalm, I believe, it is also far too glib an answer to be complete. OK, so the Psalmist is unloading his anger onto God, but what do we say about the attitudes he is expressing, the evil that he appears to be harbouring in his heart? Another part of the answer lies in the very real difference between the people of the Old Testament and the heirs of the New Covenant. Now, I don't mean that in the slightly arrogant and patronising way that says, “Oh, these are primitive people who knew only barbarity and vengeance: we've m loved on from all that”. (Just look at the news and you'll see that's not the case.) The first sections of this song are ample evidence of a person far removed from the

primitive barbarian with no concept of morality. Nor can we say that this was a person who was ignorant of God's will and who had no idea of the truths which Jesus later came to proclaim. Jesus clarified truths which the people of Israel had always known to some extent, but there two things which we must take into consideration.

Firstly, the people of Israel believed that they were God's chosen people and therefore everyone else was not chosen and stood outside the orbit of God's love. Despite the many prophecies about being a light for the Gentiles and sharing their blessings with the nations, they did not appear to have any gospel to proclaim that offered to everyone the prospect of redemption and eternal protection by God. In a sense, for them those babies who were to be smashed against the rocks were done for anyway, and killing them would prevent any more of God's enemies rising up against him and his people.

Secondly – and perhaps more importantly – scholars tell us that the people of the Old Testament times had little concept of a final judgement, a time when God would tie up all the loose ends and mete out his justice to those who deserved it. For the Psalmist and his contemporaries, God dispensed his justice as he went along – that seemed to be the way it had happened in the past and there was no reason to look to some future vindication of their faithfulness. His real difficulty was impatience – why won't God get on and do what he has to do without delay? There was a very real appreciation of God's awesome wrath and the Psalmist wants to see a bit of it in action now, not at the end of some indeterminate age.

We tend to recoil from such an attitude and we stress much more the aspects of God's love which we deem to be more acceptable to the world around us. Our God is a God who seeks only to wrap his arms around us, who would never hurt anyone. Our Jesus is the “*gentle Jesus, meek and mild*” of the children's hymn. Alexander MacClaren (a great old Scottish preacher and theologian) who wrote a commentary on *The Psalms*, wrote, “*Perhaps, it would do modern [for him, turn of the twentieth century] tender-heartedness no harm to have a little more iron infused into its gentleness, and to lay to heart that the King of Peace may be first the King of Righteousness, and that the destruction of evil is the complement of the Preservation of Good.*”

There is no getting away from the fact that our God is a God of wrath as well as a God of love and gentleness: justice cannot be justice without some element of punishment. He will vindicate those who are righteous and he will exact punishment from those who are rebellious and disobedient. The first Christians were aware of that – they had seen Jesus overturn the tables in the Temple precincts, they saw the death of Judas as the fulfilling the wrathful prophecies of the Old Testament (*Acts 1:16-20* referring to *Psalm 9:25*). In *Revelation 18:4-8* John foresees the final destruction of “*Babylon*” in terms similar to those of this Psalm.

Now, recognising that there are those who are rightly going to be the objects of God's wrath does not mean that we are able to take on ourselves the responsibility of exacting that punishment. God is wholly righteous, totally just. We are sinful and flawed, still subject to our own selfishness, so our anger is tainted with sin and self-interest and we have, as Alec Motyer puts it in his words on this passage, “*a duller moral perception of the eternal significance of right and wrong, a less clear-cut devotion to God and good, and a failure to include in our portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ the New Testament insistence on the ‘wrath of the Lamb’ (Revelation 6:16).*” We can call, as the Psalmist did, for God's justice to be demonstrated, but we have no right to take matters into our own hands – and no right, either, to stipulate the punishment. Our cries to God for his intervention must be tempered with a realisation that God does actually have everything under his control. Not only that, but we can now understand what the Psalmist perhaps could not see – that there is now a way for all men and women to take on the righteousness of Jesus Christ and so escape the wrath of God in eternity.

Kenneth Slack, in his little commentary on *Psalm 137*, writes that this Psalm “*does not reveal God, it reveals what is in the heart of man*”. It does, indeed, point to the state of the human heart, but we cannot say that it reveals nothing of God for, as we have already said, we believe God inspired this Psalm and many would say he inspired its inclusion in our Bibles. It is here as a reminder from God of the danger of

nationalism run riot and of the need for justice. But we must not forget that between us and the original readers of this Psalm stands the cross. We have a gospel to proclaim that not only includes in its message the need for justice, but also announces the possibility of salvation for the effects of God's wrath. Yes, in the end, God's judgement on those who have rejected him may seem as harsh as the sentiments expressed here, but until Jesus Christ returns, there is still time to turn to him and accept his way of escape, his offer of salvation.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Can you think of a time when you were particularly homesick? How did you feel?
- 2) What might be the equivalent for us of Jerusalem?
- 3) How do you explain the violent feelings of the Psalmist? Have you ever felt anything similar? How did you respond?
- 4) Do you think we have put too much stress on the love of God and forgotten his wrath? If so, why do you think that is? And should we try to redress the balance?
- 5) In what ways has the coming of Jesus – his life, death and resurrection – changed things? How can we communicate that to those around us?
- 6) What particularly do you take from this Psalm?