

## Psalm 137 (and Ps 130)

This morning we look at Ps 137, which is in some ways an unusual psalm. The opening feels comfortable and familiar, perhaps because there have been a number of songs written that begin 'By the rivers of Babylon'. But verses 5 & 6 have a different tone and verses 7 - 9 really jar our sensibilities - we do not expect such language in the Bible and we did not include them in the reading of the lesson. So what have we got.

There is no title for this psalm but the context is clear. It is referring to the times when the King Nebuchadnezzar had sacked Jerusalem and taken many captives back Babylon, leaving a small remnant behind and the city in ruins. The exiles did not have such a bad life and were able to live and work within Babylonian society with some success, as encouraged by the prophet Jeremiah when he wrote to them from Jerusalem: "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat the produce, take wives and have sons and daughters, and give them in marriage.." They were able to settle down, and some became quite successful, so that when some years later they were allowed to return to Jerusalem, many chose to stay in Babylon. Yet there was much distress and anguish amongst the exiles and that is what is expressed in this psalm. A group of them have sat down by a river, the river Chebar according to Ezekiel, which may have been one of the many irrigation channels fed from the Tigris and Euphrates. Perhaps they had gathered together for prayer and worship, but they couldn't worship and pray as they had in the Temple at Jerusalem. "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" We don't normally feel like that. We can go visiting anywhere we

like and we can still say our private prayers. But those exiles thought and felt differently. They felt that they were unclean, being punished for sinful lives in the past, and they could not sing God's songs to unclean people in an unclean land. Their rituals were completely disrupted. We might think that PS 130 would have expressed their sorrow for sins and appeal for forgiveness but it is a psalm of ascent, used by Pilgrims as they walked to Jerusalem for a major festival, so again the context and habitual use was quite different. The temple in Jerusalem was the focal point for all their worship of God. And in particular the songs of Zion which honoured Jerusalem as Zion, the city from which God would one day rule the whole world.

As an example, listen to Ps 122:

I was glad when they said to me,

"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. ....

Does that help us to understand verses 5 & 6 of Ps 137? (read)  
It is not chauvinism so much as a courageous faith in the promises of God. The temple, the house of God on earth, is in ruins but they do not conclude that God is defeated but rather that the ruins are a testimony to God's uncompromising righteousness - His house cannot be misused by non-believers. God is God and his promises are true.

We are in debt to those exiles who preserved their faith in hostile circumstances, allowing it to be revived and refreshed in later years, and in yet more years provide a foundation upon which Jesus could preach and teach and live totally and completely for God. The exiles had to find ways in which they could maintain and express their faith away from Jerusalem and

in doing so they would have learned. And amongst them were some who retained such a passion for God and his promises that when opportunity allowed they could organise a return to Jerusalem to rebuild it and re-start the temple rituals again.

So we come to the last three verses, the one's we did not read in the lesson and which I don't think are ever included in modern songs based on this psalm. Nor do I remember chanting them in the days when we did chant the psalms in morning and evening prayer. Why are they there and what is the context for them? The Edomites, you will recall, were the descendants of Esau whereas the Israelites were descended from Jacob, his devious twin. Just as the brothers sparred in their youth so there was bad feeling between Israelites and Edomites. They lived in adjacent territories and the Israelites had done some bad things to their neighbours over the years. But when Jerusalem was sacked the Edomites joined in and looted the city and worse still killed some trying to escape. Listen to what Obadiah writes in verses 1 and 11 - 14. [p883]

Of course the exiles would remember what had happened and would be angry with grief.

We also need to remember that warfare is always brutal and it was even worse in those days, long before any Geneva convention. There are many other records of children being battered to death during wars. The pain and grief of the exiles must have been extreme and they would recall the verse from Exodus .. an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. So that is what the psalmist is calling for - that the Edomites and Babylonians should also experience the heart rending grief and

depression caused by defeat and devastation of their lands and people.

Would we ever want to pray or just say things like that? With our English reserve and Christian heritage perhaps not. But is it always good to bury our extreme feelings and pretend they do not exist? After all, God who is all seeing knows about them anyway. Better perhaps to cry out to God in our pain and anger and say to God (even if to no-one else) what is going on inside us and then humbly ask for His help to sort us out and cope with the situation, whatever it is. Surely Jesus suffered all these things, knows how we feel and wants to give us God's peace and forgiveness, making us free to be disciples again.

There is a great variety of psalms and it is probably fair to say that most of us do not know them that well nor use them regularly. That is very different to earlier generations of Christians. The chanting of psalms that some of us grew up with was not so helpful, for somehow the challenge of the chant tended to obscure the words and their meaning. But before printed Bibles were readily available most monks and clergy, especially the Celtic ones, knew the psalms off by heart. St Cuthbert would spend a whole night reciting all of them. And in more recent times many faithful Christians use the psalms regularly. Not only do they provide us with inspiring words, the collection of all the psalms can teach us to pray. To quote the Oxford Companion to the Bible; "the familiarity and the frankness of the lament, the enthusiasm of the hymn, the confessional character of the thanksgiving - all of these characteristics speak to the human heart before God". We would do well to know them all far better than we do. Try: Motyer, Psalms by the day; Wright, Finding God in the Psalms