

Searched by the Psalms

Psalm 137 & Luke 17:5-10
(Hymns – 99, 98, 530, 556)

October 3, 2010

Faith in a Foreign Land

It's easy to get comfortable at home.
Things are the way you want them.
Everything is in a place you have chosen.
Your surroundings are familiar. It's just, well, *home*.

Even when most of us travel away from home these days,
we do so by choice.

We decide to go somewhere where we will see family,
meet friends, visit new and exciting sights, encounter interesting people,
and learn new things.

Exile is not like that. It is forced and coerced.
People are evicted from their homes against their wills.
They are sent to foreign lands,
forced to live in strange and stressed conditions,
treated poorly and exploited mercilessly.
Millions in our day live in refugee camps around the world,
experiencing this kind of life.
For some within our own land,
most notably our First Nations peoples and recently arrived refugees,
the exile is less obvious but every bit as real.

This experience of exile was very real for the Jewish people.
Much of their understanding of God
was grounded in how they came to understand his work and ways
while they were suffering in a foreign land –
first in slavery in Egypt and later in exile in Babylon.

There were three deportations of Jews to Babylon.
The first, in 597 BCE, involving king Jeconiah and his court and many others,
a second in 587 BCE of the next king, Zedekiah, and the rest of the people,
and a possible deportation after the assassination of Gedaliah,
the Babylonian-appointed governor of Yehud Province, possibly in 582 BCE.

The forced exile ended 60 years later in 538 BCE
after the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great,
who gave the Jews permission to return to Yehud province

and rebuild the Temple,
but most Jews chose to remain in Babylon.
The captivity and subsequent return to the Land of Israel
and the rebuilding of the Second Temple in the Jerusalem
are considered significant events in Jewish history and culture,
which had a far-reaching impact on the development of Judaism.
We won't go into those details this morning,
but that's a very general overview of the setting of Psalm 137.
It's recorded more fully in the later chapters of Jeremiah,
2 Kings, and 2 Chronicles in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Psalm 137 is a lament written by and for a people in exile,
dragged away against their will from their homes.
They weep when they remember their homes.
They fume in anger at what has happened to them.
They prayer to God for revenge
against those dragged them into exile.

The history surrounding this Psalm is intriguing and complex.
But I want to focus on something else this morning.

What I find most intriguing about this Psalm
is it's testimony to the power of music
to build the resilience of faith in a foreign land.
At the heart of this Psalm, as I read it,
is a recognition that singing is central to remembering
the promises and providence of God.

The songs their captors told them to sing
are in fact songs of resistance,
songs composed to remind them of their greatest joys.
What may seem like mere entertainment to the Babylonians
are in fact sources of resilience in the faith for the Jewish singers.

Resilience is an essential part of our faith.
It is a set of attitudes and behaviours
that builds strength for serving God
no matter where we may find ourselves,
no matter what the circumstances that surround our lives.
Resilience gives us the inner strength and direction
to resist being defined by our circumstances.
Instead, we are defined by our relationship with God in Jesus Christ,
by our greatest joy.

The American Psychological Association
has identified 10 attitudes and behaviours that build resilience.

Here's the list:
Make connections
Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems
Accept that change is a part of living
Move towards your goals
Take decisive actions
Look for opportunities for self-discovery
Nuture a positive view of yourself
Keep things in perspective
Maintain a hopeful outlook
Take care of yourself

This could be read as the 10 commandments of self-regard or self-love, in the sense that Jesus taught in his summary of the Great Commandment – love God with your whole being and your neighbour as *yourself*.
Treat yourself as a beloved child and friend of God.

That kind of flourishing comes from a trust deep within
that God is with us and for us,
no matter what is happening around us.
It blossoms from a deep sense of our own significance
as people who have been created to be blessings
to those around us.

And one of the ways we bless them
is to invite them to participate in our greatest joy,
in our practices of the Christian faith here at Brentwood.

It's not hard to imagine the world in which we live,
the world to which we will return at the end of this worship service,
as a place of exile, a foreign land which seems less and less like home.
Crime, violence, fear, hatred, tribalism, and the like assault us daily.

It's easy to lose contact with our greatest joy,
with our relationship with God and each other in Jesus Christ.
We need to be constantly fed and nourished in this faith
through attention to the Word, the Sacraments,
and the music of the church,
so we can courageously and confidently
sing the Lord's song in this foreign land.

That song will strengthen our resilience to be a blessing
in the worst of circumstances.

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