

Beyond hate: hope in exile

It is often said that the Book of Psalms in the Bible contains the full range of human emotions: from great joy to deep despair, and including some sentiments that we might think should have no place in the Bible at all. Our psalm for this morning is a good example. And what I want to do for a short while is to consider some of the feelings that are being expressed in these verses.

To begin with there is despair. The psalm is set in that period of Old Testament history that we call ‘the exile’, when the capital city of Jerusalem had been destroyed and many of its citizens taken away into captivity in Babylon. And here the exiles are grieving, weeping: ‘by the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept.’ These are the tears of defeat and of loss and of yearning for the past: ‘we wept when we remembered Zion...’: we wept when we remembered home; when we remembered the good times before these desperate days of darkness. The pain here is tangible and raw. And that makes this a psalm of lament, a song of voiced, articulated hurt. And we are not always very good at that in the church. We are good at songs of praise and joy and songs that cheer us up, but joy and hope can sometimes only come when grief has been expressed and anger given free reign and our bewilderment at God has been faced squarely. Only then can we move into a new place.

Then along with grief and tears there is humiliation. The exiles’ captors were rubbing their noses in their defeat. ‘Why don’t you sing us one of those nice songs of yours?’, they taunt. And, of course, the catch is that the songs they were thinking of were ones which extolled the God of Israel, songs which exalted God as the true and the living and the victorious God. And the defeat of exile mocked all those sentiments. Where is your great God now? So to sing the Lord’s song in this strange land was an act of humiliation. In more recent times Jewish captives in the Treblinka death camp were forced to sing and dance just like this and that too was a humiliation – mocking their beliefs, ridiculing their Jewishness.

But then if we jump to the end of the psalm we find sentiments that are embarrassing and that we might wish were not here. Maybe it’s because they have been humiliated, perhaps it’s because they have been mocked, that the anger of the exiles is aroused, anger that is poisoned with violence and the

desire for vengeance: ‘O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall be they who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.’ And there is surely nothing very Christian about that, bashing the brains of babies against rocks. What is this doing in the Bible?

Well, two things must be said. Firstly, these violent words do at least indicate a defiance in the Jews, a resistance, a refusal to be cowed and intimidated and defeated. Their spirit will not be bowed or broken – and that is crucial. But secondly, such violent and vengeful sentiments are, like it or not, what we sometimes feel. They may not be what we should feel, least of all as Christians, but this is realistic. And just as sometimes we need to lament and to grieve and to shake our fist at God before we can find any peace and comfort, so sometimes we need to recognise and name the hatred and the vengeance and the violence that is in us before we can move to a better place. The poison must be exposed before it can be treated.

So there is grief, humiliation and vengeance in this psalm – but there is something more. There is hope, and this is the surprise. Despite all the pain and the shame, the psalmist can write,

‘If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

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.’

Now, remember: at this point in time Jerusalem is in ruins. It is rubble and ashes, its glories gone. Yet the psalmist still remembers it, rejoices in it, celebrates it: ‘my highest joy.’ And this surely is an expression of hope and confidence. Jerusalem is down but not out, shattered but not finished. Jerusalem lives on. The psalmist may be in exile but always there is hope of return, of homecoming. His life is still centred there, in Jerusalem, as he remembers it. Here again is defiance, but defiance expressed now not in vengeance and violence, but in trust in the God of Israel – the God of Jerusalem. And so beyond grief, and humiliation, and hatred – there is hope.

The exiles could not sing for their captives – their songs were silenced in public and they hung up their harps. But I trust that away from the enemy they met together and sang, and lamented, and remembered. And there, together in

worship, in the presence of God tangible even in exile, they processed their grief and their sorrow and their anger, and so arrived at a more hopeful place.

That is what we do today at this table. We come with all our conflicting joys and sorrows, our hearts torn between love and hate, between forgiveness and vengeance, between hope and despair, between exile and homecoming – a tangle of emotions. And here Christ meets us, in bread and wine. Here we remember with gratitude events long passed but which live on – a night in Jerusalem in an upper room. Here we are centred, centred in Christ. And here we find strength to live hopefully. Amen.

Almighty and gracious God,
eternal holy and loving One,
we your people gather here,
Grateful for the gift of life
and grateful for the gift of new life in Christ Jesus.
You have come in him to affirm your love for us;
you have come to us in him
to save us from what would destroy us;
you have come to us in him
to rescue us from exile –
exile from what you have created us to be.
And you have put a new song on our lips
and a new hope in our hearts.
Forgive us, dear God,
that we sing the same old song,
the same old song of violence and injustice:
the same old song of sin and estrangement from you.
How long must we sing this tired old song?
And so we confess to you our captivity,
and we yearn for forgiveness and a new start.
And we find you here in our midst,
offering to meet us here in bread and wine,
coming to meet us in praise and our worship,
keeping faith with us even in our unfaithfulness.
Send your Holy Spirit upon us afresh.
Help us to name and to acknowledge our failures
and so renew us.
And let our lives be that new song
that brings joy to your heart.
We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour,
And we join in the words that he taught us,
Saying together...