

Dear all

I am infamous within my family for my habit of humming, especially in the shower. My choice of music is unconscious and eclectic – it can run anywhere from an extract of a Mahler symphony to the *Teddy Bears' Picnic*. Today the tune that entered my mind is one of the most incongruous – the disco hit 'By the waters of Babylon' by Boney M. It is incongruous because the words are in such contrast/contradiction to the upbeat tune – Psalm 137. Most of Judah – certainly the 'great and good' – have been uprooted from their land, the land promised by God to His people. They are in exile. The temple, the centre of their religious and national life has been destroyed, and they can no longer worship God as and how they are required to. And so, they lament.

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept: when we remembered thee, O Sion.

As for our harps, we hanged them up: upon the trees that are therein.

For they that led us away captive required of us then a song, and melody in our heaviness: Sing us one of the songs of Sion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song: in a strange land? (BCP 1662).

Can we really sing this as a disco song? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3QxT-w3WMo> if you need reminding!)

I wonder if it came into my mind subconsciously as we are in a sort of exile – from our normal life, from family and friends, and from the church and the sacraments. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? How can we act as if all is OK... all is normal?

The OT reading at Morning Prayer today (as are all OT readings for the earlier part of Holy Week) comes from the book of Lamentations, another passage that is set in the time of the Exile.

Lamentations 1.1-12a

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.

She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies.

Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting-place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.

Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe.

From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty. Her princes have become like stags that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer.

Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers in days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was no one to help her, the foe looked on mocking over her downfall.

Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery; all who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans, and turns her face away.

Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; her downfall was appalling, with none to comfort her. 'O Lord, look at my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!'

Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things; she has even seen the nations invade her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation.

All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Although the context is different, I couldn't help but see similarities with our current experience – *How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!... The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter... Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers in days of old... All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?*

Two things come rapidly to mind. Firstly, Judah had been defeated by the army of the major super-power of the day. We face an enemy that is invisible, one that we cannot physically face up to.

Secondly, the writer of Lamentations lays the blame at the sin of the people: *Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions...*

There are some preachers who are making similar claims for the current crisis. "It is God's punishment for the sins of the nations... it is the fault of (add your favourite bugbear – foreigners, liberals, homosexuals, Jeremy Corbyn etc.)..."

I really don't believe that the world works like that. Jesus challenged such views when he was ministering. "Why was this man born blind? Was it his sin, or that of his parents?" "Neither..." (John 9). "...those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Question expecting the answer No! (Luke 13:4).

Bad things happen. Our wonderful world can be a dangerous place. Sometimes it is exacerbated by human failure or sin – the effects of climate change, building a major city on an earthquake fault, the actions of people refusing to act sensibly for the good of others in a pandemic... But 'innocent' people suffer along with the 'guilty'... the 'good' and the 'bad' together. Sometimes there is no logical reason, despite the fact that we might want one... no answer to understand that overarching question "why?".

The opening canticle for Morning Prayer Passiontide continues this reading. What does such a desperate situation inspire in the writer? *For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage. Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall!*

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says

my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that we should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Even in the midst of despair, the OT writers know that God is with them, and God is good. There is always light in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it. Holy Week reminds us that even God, in Jesus, walked the path of darkness. We know that Easter will follow, but perhaps, this year especially, we first need to experience fully the path of the cross.

The link below leads to Thomas Tallis' beautiful setting of some of the words of Lamentations.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNAFeCLDSgE>

John & Victoria Worthington have asked me to pass on their greetings to all from their exile in the north. They say that they are with you all "in spirit, if not in body".

Cled Bennett has emailed a further tribute to Anne Smart. *I would like to add my tribute to Anne Smart for her contribution to the Mission Committee. She organized two craft days a year and together with George and helpers raised over a thousand pounds for good causes. She will be missed by all who knew her. Our thoughts are with George at this time.*



Finally, a prayer, posted by the Revd Nadia Bolz-Weber, a radical Lutheran minister from America:

April 5th, 2020
Aka Palm Sunday

Dear God,
Some of us are exhausted by a constant stream of bad news.
Some of us are exhausted from the effort of trying to not freak out.
Some of us are exhausted by not knowing how we will pay rent.
Some of us are exhausted from the effort of trying to entertain and educate and feed and love children who are stuck at home.
Some of us are exhausted by the 13 hour shifts in a hospital we no

longer recognize, working a job we are afraid might kill us.

Some of us showed up to this pandemic with pre-existing physical and mental health conditions that were already exhausting.

Some of us are exhausted by loneliness.

Some of us are exhausted by waiting so long for a new season of Succession.

And some of us are exhausted by the effort of trying to make this all ok for everyone else.

Life is so strained and tender right now.

I know that not a single one of us is promised another day, God.

But I guess I am asking for the strength for just the one we are in.

Give us today our daily strength.

Strength for today, and if you could spare it, bright hope for tomorrow.

AMEN.

ps- HOSANNA in the highest

Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark