

Looking at the difficult Psalms

Psalm 137

So here we are again with a psalm of lament and longing. And despite the poignant beauty of the opening verses, its clarity of meaning (and the Boney M hit from the late 70s), this psalm qualifies as difficult because it also contains some of the most vengeful language in the Psalter.

Welcome to Psalm 137.

Read this straight through. (No stopping at verse 6!) ...

...Take a time of silence, then read it through again.

What are the verse(s), phrases, words or images that stand out for you?

Do they evoke any response?

A little background

It's possible to date the composition of Psalm 137, (from the Babylon location in verse 1 and the reference to the fall of Jerusalem – v7). This psalm was composed in the 6th BC, when the citizens of Judah had been forced to walk away from their homes and all that was familiar, into exile in Babylon, modern day Iraq, where their industry and trade and business acumen helped revive the struggling Babylonian economy. And whilst they had freedom to practice their religion and go about their lives they did not have the freedom they wanted most, to return to their homeland, hence the pervading mood in the first part of the psalm.

Verses 1-6

How would you describe the mood of verses 1-6?

Can you identify with this from any personal experience?

The experience of exile is something I am guessing very few of us have undergone. ... Or is it?

This is a psalm that speaks about the experience of loss: losing their connectedness to family and friends left in Judah and more importantly losing their sense of where God is.

Their understanding of God and their relationship to God had been firmly anchored to a sense of place – to their homeland and specifically to the Temple in Jerusalem. But they can no longer go there...

While nothing like the exile the Israelites endure, nothing could have prepared us for the fact of being forced apart from people we love, or the swift and indefinite closure of our churches and cathedrals back in March. At the time of writing, they are still closed. We can no longer go there.

What effect has the closure of St Thomas church building had on you? (Remember Psalm 22 – be honest!)

Has this affected your relationship with God? If so, in what way?

How does your response to being unable to go into a church building compare/ contrast with your response to being unable to hug / spend all the time you want with your family/ friends?

For the exiles in Babylon things were made worse by the taunting they had to endure,(v3) “Sing us one of your worship songs so we can have a laugh”. Little wonder that this, on top of the exile, tipped the Israelites into a crisis of faith.

Western Christians face a similar crisis (**perhaps triggered more by indifference than mockery?**) The church building is no longer the focal point of a community – think of the London landscape. Can you spot the church buildings? And would we even find a church building featured on plans for new developments?

The once mighty Wren church of St Paul in the City of London is now a tiny building amid tall, prestigious edifices. It is still standing, still (albeit currently closed) a witness to the fact of God but it has more people who visit for its historicity than to worship. We can also see it as a metaphor for the view of God in most western minds – that our God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer no longer rules the universe.

So what might God be saying to us today about the church, through the literal and metaphorical erosion of the significance of church buildings and through their current closure?

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Verses 6-9

The wistful sadness and longing of the first part of Psalm 137 changes abruptly for the final three verses, that I once read as “oozing vindictiveness”.

Unhappily, the atrocity referred to in verse 9 was not uncommon in ancient Near Eastern warfare (Look at Is 13:16, Hosea 13:16, Nahum 3:10) and was very probably an action carried out by the conquering Babylonians. It is an extreme example of the biblical law of Talion (the eye-for- an-eye principle, the origin – via the Latin ‘*talio*’, the exaction of payment in kind – of our word retaliation). The psalmist hopes that his people will have the opportunity to pay the Babylonians back in kind for what they have done.

In the light of verses 1-6 and all you might have thought or said about these, what is the effect (on you) when you read on to verse 7 , then to verses 8-9?

We know what has led to this cry for vengeance. The psalmist cannot go home, cannot see all his family and friends. He cannot go to his place of worship. The things that had given him his identity, his rootedness and sense of belonging have been taken away.

To our shame, this loss of the things that had given him and his fellow exiles their

identity, their rootedness and sense of belonging is a recurring theme of human history.

What are the examples that come to mind, particularly from your own lifetime?

Individual and collective response varies, with the kind of anger and hatred we see here at one end of the spectrum.

What has been your response to the various losses you have experienced during lockdown?

For the psalmist, faith in God was shaken to the point of crisis but remained. (If there was no faith why would he bother to appeal to God for vengeance?) But his faith did not temper his vindictiveness...an attitude that we see expressed throughout the Old Testament in varied degrees.

Think about Joshua, whom God told to show no mercy to the inhabitants of Canaan (See the whole Book of Joshua, particularly **Joshua 8 :24-29**) and Elisha seemed pretty vindictive towards the mob of boys who made fun of him (**2 Kings 2: 23-24**)

So is it right for us to ever feel vindictive?

God is God of both the Old AND New Testaments. We are heirs of the Old and (post-incarnation) people of the New.

What difference does this make for us?

What difference should it make to us?!

Look at Matthew 5: 17 and 38-42 (If you haven't already!)

What does Jesus say to us as we wrestle with this issue?

A small final point. This is one of the few psalms that does not end with some form of doxology.

Why do you think this is so?

Spend some time thinking about where God has led your thoughts as you have looked at this psalm. Be conscious of God sitting beside you.

Talk to God about any sense of loss...

... and bring before God any attitude that you want to change.