

Psalm 137

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

⁴ How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

⁶ 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.

⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'

⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!

⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

What would it take? What would it take for you to utter such words of passionate revenge: "Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against a rock!?" Would it take your homeland being overrun, your home burned down, your loved ones killed or taken from you and who knows what else done to them? Would it take you then being enslaved in a foreign land, your artistic talent used to entertain your captors? Would it take you being reminded everyday of what you have lost as you sing the songs of your culture, language and homeland? Would it take you having to commit yourself every day to remember who you are and where you come from as painful as remembering is because to forget is to die in your heart and soul?

This is the context out of which this psalm is composed. It is a famous song and much western art and music has been created as inspired by this poetry. Among the 150 psalms that make up

the psalter, this one would be in the top 10 in terms of familiarity. Why? Is it the expression of revenge in it? Or is it more the exquisite expression of loss and the mixture of anger and grief used to express it? What does such expression do for the people then and for the millions who have read it and savoured it spiritually over the centuries?

Here's the thing about traumatic loss. We can try to block it and even erase it from our consciousness. We know from so much research coming out these days around PTSD and trauma suppressed how destructive the strategy of blocking it all is. But expressing it can also be dangerous, especially as it can be self-destructive (addiction and self-harm) or destructive toward others. Anger and shame are dangerous emotions when unrestrained and unchanneled in constructive ways that serve a larger good and a larger justice.

But the power in this psalm with its beautiful poetry, expressing what words can often fail to do, is the pain of the loss and the awful situations in which we can find ourselves experientially. Imagine the torment of being taunted to play the music we love and to sing words that keep reminding us of all that we have lost, and to do so for an audience of people who not only control us but are the very cause of our loss. And yet, the psalmist also feels compelled to keep singing these songs because this is one of the only ways left to keep alive remembrance of their identity and roots. It's all so tormenting, and yet it is also a sweet torment.

The finale of a prayer for all out revenge and a revenge that is especially cruel may be shocking and totally lacking in any sense of humanity or compassion, and yet it needs to be expressed so that it can be exorcised. Pretending desire for revenge is not in us is not pathway to overcoming it. Naming it and expressing it as art is a powerful way for it to be communicated, drawing in others and providing them with ways to resonate in their own experiences, and together seeking some healing toward a different future.

Much of what the psalmist expresses may also resonate in us in some form. Rather than being afraid of what may be in us, why not allow it to be before God who knows and sees all? And why not offer it up for ongoing healing toward a future where love as forgiveness, compassion and a justice for the vulnerable and downtrodden is the goal? Psalm 137 is an important voice in the psalter. As uncomfortable as it makes me feel, I need to read it and meditate upon it so I can find my way to freedom from what it prays, which may be in me too. What about you?

PRAYER: Thank you, O God... You know all that is in me, even those parts of me where anger, grief, shame and despair live... I pray for your love as forgiveness, as healing the wounds, as repentance for wrongs, as faith and hope that justice is possible, a justice free of revenge... I pray that your love grow in me until it is the strongest passion flowing through me... In Jesus' name; Amen.