

## Wednesday February 17 Psalm 137- a community lament

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

2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,

3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

7 Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"

8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—

9 he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

Do you remember the 1978 hit single *Rivers of Babylon* by Boney M? Don't worry, I wouldn't dream of trying to sing it. It comes from the opening words of Psalm 137, every line of it alive with pain. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept". Israel has been invaded, the temple destroyed, the people forced into exile in a foreign land far away, their captors making fun of them. All they can do is pour their distress into a song, waiting and longing for the day they can go home again and be free.

It's not the only psalm where you find the Israelites crying out in pain in the face of some disaster, whether it be military defeat, captivity or plague. These aren't the kind of psalms you want to sing if you feel happy and you want to shout with joy. But they come into their own when a whole nation, or, as now, the whole world, is struck down by a pandemic. People are desperately sick, hospitals are full, medical staff are exhausted.

So much that we took for granted has disappeared, and we don't know if it will ever return. It's a kind of bereavement. When you're bereaved, you need to mourn, to express your pain and your fear for the future. And when you can't find your own words to describe how you feel, it's psalms like this one, with its opening howl of pain that come alive in a new way ("By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept"). We do need to lament, and we need words like this to do it. These words of lament are given to us by the living God Himself, inviting us to use them to pour out, in anger if that's how we feel, strong emotions back to Him.

In the first week of Lent 2021, I've chosen LAMENT rather than REPENT as a daily theme. But we won't stay there, paralysed by pain and fear. We've a journey to undertake. LAMENT is the starting point, RESURRECTION is the destination and we'll come to this at Easter and the days beyond. On the way, in the next few weeks, we'll arrive at different points, to stop and explore some other themes – FEAR, REPENTANCE, THANKSGIVING, PERSEVERANCE and HOPE.

But we're still at the start, thinking about LAMENT. You can always choose your own words of lament to talk to God about how everything that's going on has affected you. If you don't feel comfortable doing that, look through the psalms in your bible or your prayer book. Choose one that appeals to you, and read it out loud. You won't be reading in an empty room; you'll be reading it back to its divine author. He will hear and he will listen.