



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Reading: Psalm 137

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Background of the reading

The background of the Psalm is a very important bit of history that every Jew remembered. I am of course talking of the dreadful event in the year 586 BC when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the whole city and captured everyone who was not killed in the bloody invasion and took them as exiles to Babylon. They even destroyed the only certainty they had namely the temple that was on the Mount Zion as a burgh of strength and power. They thought it would never ever happen to them because God lives in his temple.

But now the Psalmist is remembering how devastated they were in exile. How they came together as slaves at the canals that came out of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and how the Babylonians asked them to sing about their temple on Zion, songs for the Lord God. But they could not get themselves to sing any songs. They just hung their harps on the branches of the trees. How could they sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign unholy land? God is holy and it is not appropriate to sing to His praise in such circumstances! And to make matters worse, how could they sing God's Holy songs in front of their captives, who were Gentiles and unclean people. You can only come into God's holy presence when you are cleansed according to their religious laws.

Despite their pain and struggle they still remembered the joys of living in Jerusalem and going to the temple on the Mount Zion. They had to admit, they could not forget about their past. Then the Psalmist says if he forgets Jerusalem or Zion, he is willing to give up his right hand. The right hand was the most important hand because that was the hand that held the sword in times of war. It was the hand that protected you from your enemies. So he is prepared to be vulnerable/exposed rather than

forgetting Jerusalem and Zion. He is even prepared to lose his voice, meaning not to sing rather than forgetting to think of Zion. Because if he forgets Zion, he forgets God.

Verses 7-9 must be read in the context of what happened when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem. They acted against God. They killed innocent women and children. And the Edomites were looking on without doing anything to help. The Edomites were Israel's cousins. Tradition has it that they were descended from Esau; Israel was of course descended from Esau's brother Jacob. They were spectators of everything tragic that happened to the people of Jerusalem. They were old enemies of Israel and took the opportunity to openly show their hatred against Israel and Zion. "Tear it down," they cried; "tear it down to its foundations!" was their slogan. Now the Psalmist is asking God to remember them for what the Babylonians and the Edomites did.

Psalm 137 is a song of lamentation which portrays bad and good memories and the human inclination to think of revenge. However the Psalmist remembers just in time, it is not his task to judge or to punish. God is the One who is in control. God will act as He wishes! Therefore his wish: Remember, O Lord!

Amen

Sermon

THE TEXT FOR THE SERMON IS VERSE 1:

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

What do YOU remember when you think of God? Do you also weep because of chances lost of knowing Him better?

When we think of God we must remember what He did for us all. In Jesus Christ He did not remember our sins and ungodliness. He just thought of his Love for humankind and died in the place of the sinners, of you and me!

God did not remember that we did not deserve it at all. He went through death itself to be resurrected so that we can live in the hope, expectation and surety of the new kingdom of heaven where there will be no more wars and conflict.

God offers you and me chances upon chances through His Holy Spirit to

live in a meaningful relationship with Him. We can like the Psalmist remember all the good things that God is doing for us namely:

- that He provides in our daily needs,
- that we can live in a free country without fear and tribulation,
- and that we can know we are never alone and without His loving care!

Unlike the Psalmist we do not have to sing songs of Lamentation when we think of God. We can sing songs of joy because God gave us a new future. We can dance because God is alive and reigns forever and ever.

But we must agree with the Psalmist that we can only sing songs of Lamentation when we think of humanity and what people did to each other and still continue doing!

On this Remembrance Day we must remember how fallible and frail we as humans are, how infinite we are and how all our plans usually come to nothing. We must think of all the humans who suffered and struggled in all the wars like the poor Jews in Jerusalem mentioned in Psalm 137. We must think of all the victims of a world that does not love peace – a world that does not know God and His Peace! We must also think of the ugly face of war when we read verse 9 because it is a fact that innocent children almost always get hurt or caught up in our wars!

May we today remember how different God is and how we need to praise him day and night for His glory! We must remember always to thank Him for saving us. We must remember to sing songs of joy that - despite all the wars and conflict that He is still in charge.

And if we remember the wars of the past and the present, when we remember all the lives lost in battle, we must remember to learn important lessons namely:

- that whenever humans are in charge there will be poverty, war, hopelessness, decay in contrast to the everlasting kingdom of God where there always is peace, hope, love and happiness.
- not to trust humans but to trust and obey the Lord God above all.
- on the battlefields there are no atheists.
- we must always take life seriously as a gift from God.

Remembrance Day is also about our priorities. It must help us focus on God who sacrificed his life so that we can live in all eternity with Him. It is about recognising God's presence and calling in the midst of uncertainty, chaos, decay, war and struggle. It is about singing songs of joy when we remember GOD and singing songs of Lamentation when we think of

humanity!

May we go from here and confirm with words and deeds that God is so important to us all that if we ever forget Him, that we would rather stop living because a life without the presence of the Living God is not a life at all!

Amen