

073 Fourth Sunday of Lent B 2024

Let us sing the Lord's song!

Our rather long first reading today tells of a most significant series of events in the history of Israel. In 587 BC, the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Jerusalem. They destroyed the temple, burnt down many buildings and took all the leading citizens and craftsmen into exile in Babylon. It was a shocking, traumatic event.

Then 70 years later the Persians, under King Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians and one of the first acts of Cyrus was to issue a decree allowing all the exiles in the empire to return to their homelands, rebuild their cities, and follow their religion.

However, many of the Jews in Babylon were not very enthusiastic about this decree. When they first arrived in Babylon, they were housed in detention camps but after a relatively short time they were allowed to live in the wider community, to take up employment, and in time build their houses etc. After 70 years, they were well settled. Indeed, the first generation of exiles had died, and the third or fourth generation living in Babylon 70 years later didn't really know Jerusalem. Babylon was their home. The thought of going to Jerusalem and rebuilding the city was not very appealing. Also, the people from the country areas of Israel who had moved into Jerusalem after the exiles left, and were now occupying the land, didn't want them back. So, in fact, it was only a small number of Jews who took up the offer of Cyrus to go back to Jerusalem.

This dilemma of the Jews in Babylon is captured beautifully in our responsorial psalm today. The author of the psalm clearly loves Babylon with its rivers, its beautiful poplars, its fertile climate, etc., but another part of him feels guilty because he knows he must not forget Jerusalem and he has a fear that this could happen, so he prays: 'O let my tongue cleave to my mouth, if I remember you not, if I prize not Jerusalem above all my joys'.

Even the Babylonian people are kind to him: 'Sing to us', they said, 'one of Israel's songs.' The request seems genuine. But he could not do it. For him it would be wrong to sing the song of the Lord on alien soil. From a distance of 2500 years we may think, 'What a pity he felt that way!' It could have been a moment of missionary outreach, of promoting faith in Israel's God among the Babylonians.

Our Gospel today reminds us that while Jerusalem is a special and sacred city, God's love is never restricted to one city or place. No, as Jesus said, God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to be our saviour. The desire of God is for everyone to have eternal life. The measure of people is not whether they are Jewish or not, but whether they seek to live in the light of truth or the darkness of evil.

At times Australia might seem like Babylon, increasingly non-religious, even anti-religious, but that is not a reason for us to leave Australia and seek a country more supportive of our faith. God loves the world so much, and that certainly includes Australia, and it is here in this country that we are called to sing the Lord's song, to practise Jesus' great command to love God and our neighbour, to rejoice and encourage all people who seek to live in the light of truth, and by our example encourage others to turn away from darkness.

Today, let us pray for our whole country, that everyone may experience in some way, joy and hope and peace in the resurrection of the Lord this Easter.

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