

Resident aliens – being in a foreign land Pentecost 19 - 3rd October 2010

Readings:

Lamentations 1:1-6, Psalm 137, Luke 17: 5-10, 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 137

¹By the rivers of Babylon –
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
²On the willows there we hung up our harps.
³For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴How could we sing The Lord’s song in a foreign Land?
⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not see Jerusalem above my highest joy.
⁷Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said,
“Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!”
⁸O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

In 1989 Stanley Hauerwas and William Willamon, published a book called “Resident Aliens”. They were speaking out of their southern Methodist US context. However, it has become a rather prophetic book. In it they suggested that the US was no longer a Christian country and that Christians were more like a Christian colony resident in the wider host community. They said many other useful things too.

However, it is their title, ‘Resident Aliens’, that I want to revisit today.

IN Psalm 137 we have a very well known psalm, well the first four verses are, even up to the last two verses. Many renderings of this psalm musically over the years have simply not known what to do with the violence of the last two verses and so have tended to stop short and not engaged with them.

It is the question posed in verse 4 that I would want to address.

“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” This is the question that daily confronts us in contemporary Australia. For more and more, Christian community is becoming ‘resident aliens’ in our own country.

Psalm 137 is a passionate psalm and a very human one. It gives vent to strong emotions, including the human capacity to resort to violence or to express our passions in violent ways when we find ourselves in absolute extremes.

Psalm 137 is somewhat unusual in the broad context of the 150 psalms we have as the Book of Psalms, as it is possible to situate it historically because of what it says within the text. It indicates clearly the historical situation from which it emerges.

Those speaking the psalm are clearly located in Babylon, situated on the Euphrates River and recalling their lives in Zion, in other words, Jerusalem.

In 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the majority of Jewish citizens were deported to live in Babylon, especially those who were educated and had some leadership in the Jewish community of Jerusalem. This Babylonian exile continued until the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BCE.

This psalm gives us a poignant insight to the mood of the Jews living in Babylon. Having Jerusalem reduced to a pile of rubble was a political crisis for the people but being deported to live amongst people who had other gods was a religious crisis, eloquently captured in this psalm with the verse 4 question – “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

We may not have been deported to a foreign land, but for Christians in Australia it is as though we are living in a foreign land, living as resident aliens as Hauerwas and Willamon described.

In fact the Babylonian exile was not all ‘doom and gloom’ for the Jewish people. They did adjust and find a way to worship the one true God in this new place. They discovered they could worship God in a foreign land. Much of the emerging theological conversation of our day is suggesting that the story of the exile may hold valuable keys for us in discovering ways of being faithful followers of Christ in what is beginning to feel a more and more hostile environment.

Psalm 137 is a lament. It is appropriate for us to lament those things that have changed, that have propelled us into this strange and new territory, but having lamented about this we need to do as those in exile did. We need to discover ways of living faithfully in this new context.

Many of us have migrant experiences in our family DNA somewhere. If we ourselves have not come to Australia as migrants or refugees then our parents or grandparents did. Those who have come as refugees, in particular, can give us valuable clues as to how to live in this new place in which we find ourselves.

How do migrants and refugees make a new home? Psalm 137 tells us to 'remember'. Remembering is the clue to understanding the intense violence of the last two verses. We don't condone such violence, but being human we can understand this expression of extreme anguish as the people remembered the assault on Jerusalem.

Three times in the psalms 'remembering' comes to the fore. Remembering is important, but it is not everything. Our faith is a dynamic one, not one that is stored away in museums – sometimes now called church buildings.

What is it that refugees have been able to bring with them? They have not been able to bring their homes and often not much of the material signs of their past lives. But they do remember, they bring the stories of that place from which they have been uprooted. They bring the customs and ways. So too, we need to remember the stories of faith that can speak into our new world.

WE have moved from being the hosts in our society to being the guests; the resident aliens that have a rather more precarious existence as a small community at the edge of our society. No longer can we expect to dominate the centre of our world as we have been accustomed to doing.

This means that we need to re-think the ways we live in our world. I would suggest that there is a range of important skills and ways of approach needed so that we can sing the Lord's song in this foreign land in which we find ourselves – modern secular Australia.

Learn the new language –

A migrant or refugee has to rapidly learn the language of their new place. Otherwise they stay cut off in an enclave, restricted to the ghetto of their own kind.

Learn it well so the nuances can be heard –

We all have stories of not understanding the idiom of a new place. Who hasn't heard the story of a new migrant being told to 'bring a plate' and the bemused looks when they did just that. Or my recent experience at a church lunch where I made my luscious home grown rhubarb, of which I was very proud, into a crumble and took it along. Only to have it handed back to me at the end of lunch with a 'we decided not to put it out'. I had not conformed sufficiently to the unspoken rules of this other place that I was visiting as a guest. It had been a stand around lunch of finger food.

MY crumble required plates and spoons and they were using minimal plates and disposable ones at that! Coming from somewhere else, I had not known that.

Don't forget who you are – in other words remember your story and know how to tell it.

Be able to discern what from your history is useful in this new place and what should be let go.

Thinking of ourselves as resident aliens trying to discover how to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land will perhaps help us see more clearly how we should step into this new context.

We need to be good observers and participants in this new culture, but remember who we are. WE need to be able to speak the new language, but remember our stories and know how to reinterpret them.

As we come to gather around the table where Christ is the host, let us experience again the joy that comes from being guest at his table.

May the experience of those who sat down and wept as they remembered Zion, help inspire us to see past our grief and tears to a new place in our world to which our God is calling us.

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