

Psalm 137

4th Sunday of Lent Year B
Evening Prayer Tuesday Week 4

This is one of the finest lyric poems of the Psalter. It is a lament or elegy. Psalms 44 and 74 have elements of lament in them, but, unlike Psalm 137, they end in a prayer of petition. It is a resistance song for those in exile who refused to give up hope of returning to Jerusalem.

**¹By the rivers of Babylon
– there we sat down and
wept when we remem-
bered Zion.**

The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sack-cloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city.

– Lamentations 2:10-11

**²On the willows there we
hung up our harps.**

There is no comparison between Babylon and home.

There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

– Psalm 46:4

Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up, and none of whose ropes will be broken. But there YHWH in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass.

– Isaiah 33:20-21

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

– Isaiah 43:19

**³For there our captors
asked us for songs; our
tormentors asked for
mirth, saying, ‘Sing us
one of the songs of Zion!’**

All who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads at daughter Jerusalem; ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?’

– Lamentations 2:15

**⁴How could we sing a
song of YHWH* in a for-
eign land?**

As for you, mortal human being, cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people; and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them; for they are a rebellious house.

– Ezekiel 3:25-26

Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

– Isaiah 65:18

Remember YHWH in a distant land, and let Jerusalem come into your mind.

– Jeremiah 51:50

The New Testament Book of Revelation speaks of the new Jerusalem (the Christian community – 3:12; 21:2,10) and the new Babylon (the oppressive Roman system – 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2,10,21).

On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them. But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress. You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity; you should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity. You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives; you should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress.

– Obadiah 11-14

Thus says the Lord YHWH: Because Edom acted revengefully against the house of Judah and has grievously offended in taking vengeance upon them, therefore thus says the Lord YHWH, I will stretch out my hand against Edom, and cut off from it humans and animals, and I will make it desolate; from Teman even to Dedan they shall fall by the sword. I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel; and they shall act in Edom according to my anger and according to my wrath; and they shall know my vengeance, says the Lord YHWH.

– Ezekiel 25:12-14

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 set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

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

Revenge against Babylon

Because you cherished an ancient enmity, and gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity, at the time of their final punishment; therefore, as I live, says the Lord YHWH, I will prepare you for blood, and blood shall pursue you; since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed shall pursue you.

– Ezekiel 35:5-6

Thus says YHWH: If those who do not deserve to drink the cup still have to drink it, shall you be the one to go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished; you must drink it.

– Jeremiah 49:12

Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery; all who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans, and turns her face away.

– Lamentations 1:8

**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!**

The Book of Lamentations also looks to God to vindicate his people (Lamentations 1:22; 3:64; 4:22).

The psalmist longs for revenge against Babylon. See also Isaiah 14,21,47 and Jeremiah 50-51.

I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set their fortresses on fire, you will kill their young men with the sword, dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their pregnant women.

– 2Kings 8:12

Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished.

– Isaiah 13:16

She became an exile, she went into captivity; even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; lots were cast for her nobles, all her dignitaries were bound in fetters.

– Nahum 3:10

As a reflection on the psalm let us enjoy the following Romance by Saint John of the Cross (composed in 1578).

1. By the rivers
of Babylon
I sat down weeping,
there on the ground.
2. I remembered you,
O Zion whom I love,
and in that sweet memory,
I wept the more.
3. I removed my festive garments,
and put on my working clothes.
I hung on the green willows
the music which gave me joy.
4. I put it aside in hope
for that which I hoped for in you.
There love wounded me
and took away my heart.
5. I begged love to kill me,
since it had wounded me so.
I cast myself into its fire,
knowing that it burned,
6. removing the guilt of the young bird
that would die in its flame.
I was dying in myself,
and breathing in you alone.
7. I died within myself for you,
and for you I came back to life,
because the memory of you
gave life and took it away.
8. The strangers rejoiced
among whom I was a captive.
They asked me for the songs
which I sang in Zion:
'Sing us a song from Zion;
let us hear how it sounds'.
9. I said: How in a strange land
where I weep for Zion
can I sing of the happiness
which was mine in Zion?
I would be forgetting her
if I rejoiced in an alien land.
10. May the tongue with which I speak
cling to my palate,
if ever I forget you,
in this land where I dwell.
11. Zion, by the green branches
which Babylon holds out to me,
may my right hand be forgotten (that I
used with such love when home in you)
12. if I do not remember you,
my greatest joy,
or if I celebrate one day of festival,
or feast at all without you.
13. O daughter of Babylon,
miserable and wretched!
Blessed is He
in whom I have placed my trust.
He will punish you
for what I have received from your hand,
14. and He will gather his little ones,
and me, who wept because of you,
to the rock who is Christ,
for whom I abandoned you.