

Transcript of Reading and sermon – Sunday 9 August 2020

A long obedience in the same direction. The comeback of joy.

Sylvia Leslie reading Psalm 126:

When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.
Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, oh LORD,
like streams in the Negev.
Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.
He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen.

Bevan Sylvester preaching:

Thank you so much Sylvia. Today we are looking at this very moving psalm; 126. As you know we are studying the songs of ascent, some that come from the collection of Psalms 120-134. These precious poems were used as songs and as prayers by the pilgrims, as they made their way to the temple in Jerusalem. There's something very special about today's psalm, for it looks like it was written post Babylonian exile. It speaks about returning to Zion, which is an old name for Jerusalem. It remembers how the captives came back, singing songs of praise and joy. It's even mentioned there that they felt like people who were dreaming dreams, for the experience of getting back to Jerusalem in many ways felt too good to be true. Today's psalm is indeed a psalm of celebration and thanksgiving.

Now according to me there are two history changing events in the Old Testament. Of course according to our records there are many important events, but if you ask me there were two which totally and utterly changed the course of Jewish history. First one of course was the exodus, written of course in the book of Exodus. It is written there how on that impressive occasion, God got them out of slavery. How they then went to Mount Sinai in chapter 19 of the book of Exodus and entered into a special arrangement with God, known as a covenant and of course that covenant made a lasting impression on God's people. For the rest of the Old Testament, we read how they sometimes obeyed the covenant but also how they sometimes conveniently neglected the covenant and forgot who they were. So the exodus is there, it was an enormous event that directed their path. The second dramatic event that rattled who they were was the Babylonian exile. It had been a long time coming and God tried his very best to speak to them, a word of warning and reprimand. That is why

Jeremiah has gone down in history as the “weeping prophet”, for he had for many years foreseen that because of their naughty behaviour there would be some definite consequences and it looks like the Babylonian exile was exactly that. We have the words of Jeremiah recorded, not only in the book that bears his name, but also in his lamentations, and there we see this depressed man weeping, worrying about the future of God's people. He tried his very best to steer them in another direction but to no avail, and soon they found themselves crying their eyes out at the rivers of Babylon.

There were two prophets active during Babylonian times. These were Isaiah and Ezekiel. There we have it said to us how the Babylonians came to invade the Holy City. How they rocked up at the gates of Jerusalem, how they destroyed the homes, how they hurt the women and how they burnt down the temple. Nothing could be more unbearably devastating for God's people, than to see this take place in front of their very eyes. When one reads the chapters of Lamentations, one will see exactly the effect this has on Jeremiah and on the people. They were dragged by the Babylonians all the way to the country between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers and there they sat for almost three generations, feeling uncertain about the future, fearing the road ahead. From what we have in scripture it looks like the Babylonians treated them a bit better than the Egyptians had centuries before, but the main tragedy remained however, that they were not able to build a temple in Babylon. Many of the Jews started businesses and of course where there were ten Jewish families to be found, a synagogue was erected as a place of instruction and gathering. But they did long very deeply for a temple. For the temple was believed to be the place where God was not only worshipped, but where the very presence of God dwelt. No temple to them meant no God's presence. That is why it is so haunting to call to mind that God spoke through those wise prophets, Ezekiel who was a priest and Isaiah. They brought God's people words of comfort and reassurance. I don't think we can fully imagine how shattered they must have felt; how hopeless, how alone, how convinced they were that God had finally turned his back on them for good, that God had left them alone, that God had had enough. This was their very strong suspicion and guys like Isaiah and Ezekiel, had to try their very best to persuade the people otherwise. I'm always intrigued, not only by the message of Ezekiel, but particularly by the message of comfort and inspiration Isaiah was to give to the people. When one looks at Isaiah chapter 40 to 55, one will see that God was into the serious business of telling his people that even in exile they are loved, that they are cared for, that they are remembered and that his plan for them would still work out.

When one looks at psalm 126 it looks like it was put together post exile, when they had already come back to Jerusalem. The Babylonians invaded Jerusalem twice; in 597 BC, that's where they deported the clergy and the nobility to Babylon. They had the temerity to come back a decade later in 587 BC to fetch the rest of God's covenant people. In 538 BC the leader of the Persians, somebody with the name of Cyrus II, invaded Babylon which was no longer that powerful a nation. He spotted in Babylon all the nations that had been forced to be there in exile, and the first things Cyrus did do was to say to all the nations who the Babylonians had conquered, “go home please, I'm begging you, go to where you had come from.” This of course was the wonderful opportunity the Jews had been waiting for; a chance to return to their beloved homeland, to be back in Jerusalem where they belonged. It was little surprise that the first thing that they ended up doing when back in Jerusalem was to start rebuilding the temple, which was then eventually rededicated in 515 BC. This psalm speaks right to our heart, because it talks about how God answers prayers, how God always fulfils God's purposes and how God always works with us and not against us. There must have been many moments for God's people in Babylonian exile, totally flattened by their despair, totally crushed by

their sense of having been forsaken by God. But God constantly came to them through the messages of Isaiah, who reminded them that God was with them still. That they needn't be afraid, for God would fight for them and that God would one day answer their prayers of making it possible for them to return with singing and rejoicing. This psalm, psalm 126 is the proof that that was exactly what happened. When the time came the exiles went back to Jerusalem. God's plan worked, God's purposes were fulfilled and God's dream came true. It is so interesting to note that the author of psalm 126 also alludes to the fact that as they were entering Jerusalem, that they were feeling as if they were dreaming, as if it was some kind of hallucination, some kind of far fetched fantasy. But of course as they touched the soil, as they saw the ruins that it been left behind, they knew that God hadn't joked when God had sent to them, right at the beginning of the exile that's what he had in store for them would be worth the wait. Let me reiterate to you some of those verses that Sylvia read for us. "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion", in other words to Jerusalem, "we were like people who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter." that's a lekker one hey? With laughter. "Our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the other nations, that the Lord has done great things for them."

How we wish that this psalm could also be our reality in these times, for in many ways we are finding ourselves in a strange place, in a place in which we do not want to be in. In an exile, as it were and all we feel like doing is weeping and crying. In fact many people over the last few weeks have said exactly that to me; that's all that they are in the mood for, is sitting in a little heap and crying until better days come. So I think it is rather safe for us to say that we are in our own kind of exile in these days of Covid-19. That we are also feeling uncertain about the future; fearing the road ahead. But we have also allowed our minds to wonder whether God is still with us, whether God still remembers, whether God still knows our name. I will say this repeatedly everyday if I have to, to myself and to others, that the words those profits of old still ring true; that God cannot betray his people, that God cannot deny himself, that God is exactly who he said he was and that our trust in him is never misplaced. When we read the words of Isaiah, that ancient seer, we will see that God spoke through him words of hope and words of strength, words that we can still hold on to today. For in those chapters God says that those who wait upon him will renew their strength, Isaiah 40 verse 28. God says in Isaiah 43 that he has called us by name, that we are his and that obviously no one and nothing, not even a blinking virus can change that. One of my favourite passages in Isaiah's book comes from Isaiah 49, where God goes as far as saying that even if it were possible, not that it is, but even if it were possible for a mother to forget her own child that she has brought into the world, God says even that will happen-able, that he would never forget his people. For time and time again, over and over again, in the words of Ezekiel and Isaiah, while God's people were feeling completely and utterly broken, in exile of all places, God raised up people to speak in his name, perhaps even a little bit like I feel called to speak in his name, to you. Words of hope and comfort for all of us who find ourselves in some kind of inexplicable Babylonian exile.

I believe that God comes to us again today and that God whispers into our hearts, into our shaking hearts these life changing words. For God knows there will come a day when this pandemic ends. God knows that there will come a day when we feel better and happier and stronger. There's even a verse in Isaiah which says, and this was preached long before they actually returned to Jerusalem, Isaiah had this vision and he said, "therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return and they will come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. Sorrow and sighing will flee away forever." If you have nothing else today dear friend, know that you have these words, on which you can build your very life. These words which become a solid rock for us as God's people of

faith. For we know that what is happening worldwide, what is taking place in this country, for we know that what we are facing during this harrowing period will not destroy us. The exile will end. This crisis will be no more. We will rise and we will overcome. They came back to Jerusalem singing and rejoicing and other people were talking about what God has done for them. It will be the same for us; others will look at us, the church, and see and say, "surely the Lord has done great things for them." So I invite you to look forward to that day, where our weeping will cease, where our worries will be contained, where our fears will stop. For God will come through for us; for God's tomorrow is always better than today. Amen