

4th Sunday of Lent (B) 2015

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede.

Last week a jury in the United States award seven million dollars to the family of Marvin Gaye, having decided that he was the true author of a hit song of last year, and not those who had claimed it as theirs. It just goes to show that, like old soldiers, old songs never die. Unlike old soldiers, they do not fade away, they get re-arranged and re-issued every twenty or thirty years. It is, however, unusual for a song written two and half thousand years ago to make it into the pop charts. But Psalm 136, which we heard as our responsorial psalm today was in the pop charts when I was a student; to a different tune it was one of the tracks on a top selling album, recorded by a singer who had at least one number one single; and in yet a third version that same psalm appeared in a popular musical. Who can remember with me the three versions of Psalm 136?

"*By the rivers of Babylon*" was a hit for Boney M in the mid 1970's; Don McLean who had a No 1 hit with "*American Pie*" - remember he took his "chevvy to the levy but the levy was dry"? He recorded a song we sang as a round in primary school, "*By the waters, the waters of Babylon*". and David Essex and friends sang "On the willows there, we hung up our harps" in the rock musical *Godspell*. Give yourselves a gold star if you recalled all of those, or if you remember one of your grand parents humming them.

The psalm, original and in its many reincarnations, has power and poignancy still. It resonates with eternal, familiar sentiments of nostalgia, homesickness, desolation and undying embers of hope, amid a longing for the way things once were long ago in a homeland far away.

Pop songs and liturgical recitals do not though, give the whole picture. What they do not include, what we never hear in the liturgy, what is censored in each and every public performance of the song are its final two stanzas. Let me break the taboo and, with an appropriate health warning - this is not for the squeamish, tell you what the two final verses say:

*Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom
the day of Jerusalem when they said, "Tear it down!
Tear it down to its foundations!"
O Babylon, destroyer. He is happy who repays you
the ills you brought on us.
He shall seize and shall dash your babies' heads on the rocks.*

Even in this mild translation these cannot be mistaken for pious, holy sentiments - which is why we never hear them in church. Yet these vicious, blood-letting lines of hate are part of the much-loved psalm. They are words of Holy Writ; part of the Bible, the inspired Word of God.

For some it is a scandal that these words should be in the Bible, they would expunge them as Bowdler sanitised Shakespeare. For others these horrible words show that this **is** the inspired Word of God. For these are true, honest words. They accurately

express the feelings of the exiles, deported brutally from their homes and homeland, now far away in a foreign country, cut off from their heritage, their identity as a people, their reason for being. God had promised Abraham and his descendants the land for all time. All time ended when the Babylonians sacked the city. God had abandoned his people. They were a people no longer; and God was no longer their God. They were orphaned in every way; desolation was complete.

The exiles longed to return but were powerless, a subjugated nation, no longer a nation. So they sang their songs in a bid to remember their homeland and in their songs they vented their considerable anger, their hatred for their oppressors, their desire for vengeance. They expressed what boiled inside them; the poison that filled their hearts and minds. But they did so in prayer. They took their curdling wrath to God. That example makes those bitter stanzas the inspired Word of God. They show us what we should do with our anger, our hate. We take it to God.

There will have been, there will be in the future, times when we want to kill, or at least do serious damage to some people. Not a few of us will have senior bankers on our personal hate-lists. Solicitors are my favourite breed at the moment. A few of us might like to have half an hour with the leaders of IS on their own. There are times when we want to do harm to perpetrators of violence, and purveyors of injustice; the ruthless who trample the poor without a second glance. Our blood boils and we can do nothing.

The psalmist on the banks of the Euphrates river tells us to take our anger to God. To rant and rave and say unspeakable things to God.

That is not how we were brought up. We are taught to speak nicely to God, as we would to our grandfather. To use nice words politely, or the well tried familiar formulae. So we treat God as an ageing relative, a little dotty who needs to be humoured. We should treat God as a trusted friend to whom we can pour out our hearts, especially when our hearts are overflowing with anger and hate, and desires for vengeance and violence.

God can cope. God can take the anger of the tortured soul. God can absorb the hurt and pain and transform it. On the cross Jesus prayed, he was in agony, believing himself abandoned by God - but he prayed.

We are God's 'work of art', Paul tells us in the second reading. Not all great art is pretty. Some of the finest paintings, the sculptures that speak most powerfully to us, are brutal, shocking. The agony of the soul in torment is tangible in some of Van Gogh's mighty work; and their greatness, their beauty is in the agony.

When our hearts brim over with tortured anguish, when our thoughts are not pretty thoughts, God, the supreme artist can reveal the beauty in our agony, and transform sheer ugly horribleness into a work of art that will last even longer than the timeless psalms of David.