

# Toronto United Mennonite Church

## Psalm 137

1. Millions of people are on the move across Europe, fleeing violence in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan – nations destabilised by western military intervention that failed to think through the consequences. Millions of refugees the West does not welcome or want to accept any responsibility for. By the rivers of Europe, they sit down and weep. Psalm 137 expresses the anguish and disorientation of being refugees, strangers, exiles – a powerful and disturbing psalm that we need to sit with in this context.

2. Many Christians today are drawn especially to the theme of exile for other reasons. The church in the West seems to be moving into a period of exile. We are no longer at the centre of society but on the margins, a minority community in an alien environment, wondering where God is leading us. Without neglecting the suffering of refugees in many places today, maybe we can also learn from the exilic literature for our own context.

3. Nobody is suggesting an exact parallel between our experience today and that of the Israelite exiles in Babylon several centuries before Christ – but there are some powerful, encouraging and challenging similarities.

4. A group of Israelite exiles in Babylon have been taunted by their captors, tormented with jibes about their distant and unreachable homeland, urged to sing a ‘song of Zion’ (v3).

5. This treatment provokes an outpouring of emotion – grief and self-pity as they ponder their forlorn situation, resentment at being asked to sing for their tormentors, yearning to be back in Jerusalem, and violent anger against the Babylonians who destroyed their city and against the Edomites who rejoiced at its fall. The last verse pronounces a blessing on any who take vengeance on their enemies by kidnapping and murdering their children.

6. The exiles are disoriented, miserable and ready to lash out at anyone who can be held responsible for their plight. Jeremiah and others will have an uphill struggle to help them come to terms with their situation and accept God’s purposes for them in exile. The inclusion of this vitriolic psalm in the Psalter does not justify their reactions but affirms that all human emotions can be brought into God’s presence.

7. And the poignant and unanswered question – ‘How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?’ – is one many followers of Jesus are now asking as the chill winds of post-Christendom blow through the threadbare vestiges of Christendom and reveal that the western church is also in exile.

8. Some mourn the passing of an era in which most people were either active or latent Christians, and when churches were influential and respected. Others lash out at people and trends supposedly to blame for their discomfort: secularists, other faith communities, the media, etc. We may not want to beat up babies, but there is grief, disorientation, anger and resentment in many churches.

9. Have you encountered these reactions? I do frequently as I travel around. What did God say to these exiles in Babylon? How did God respond to this psalm? What might God say to us in our exile?

### **Jeremiah 29: 4-7**

1. What was Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles? What was God's word to them?

(a) Put down roots – learn to live in Babylon, learn to live in the present, learn to thrive in a different culture without fear or compromise. We dare not live in the past, shut ourselves off from society or wait passively for things to change.

(b) Build for the future – sow seeds, build houses, have children, strengthen community. Our churches have been declining for some time and it is easy to think we can do nothing about this. But we can. We can take initiatives to sustain and extend our communities. It may not be harvest time, but we can sow seeds and lay foundations.

(c) Take the long view – rather than despairing or expecting things to change quickly, the exiles needed to trust God's sovereign purposes and be patient. In our own culture of speed and instant gratification, this perspective is hard – but vital.

2. Put down roots, build for the future, take the long view – no quick fixes! Later in his letter Jeremiah adds, 'Don't believe the false prophets.' Don't expect a magic solution – a plug-in-and-play programme, a religious revival, a return to past glories. This is not what God is saying to the exiles – and maybe not to us either. This is a hard message in a culture of instant gratification.

3. But there is more – and it gets harder. 'Seek the shalom of the city'. Look for ways to bless Babylon! Love your enemies. Don't plan revenge. Your destiny, your prosperity, your peace is caught up in Babylon's.

4. What does this mean for us? It means seeking first the kingdom rather than the church. It means embracing a vision of social and cultural transformation rather than focusing only on ourselves, our churches and our concerns. It means asking what shalom looks like in our neighbourhoods. It means turning outwards, not inwards.

5. What reason did Jeremiah give for offering the exiles this difficult counsel? Did you spot this? Twice the Lord says through Jeremiah 'I have carried you into exile'. You thought it was Nebuchadnezzar, but it was the Lord. God is with you in exile. God has purposes for you in Babylon. Can we possibly believe that God is leading us out of empire, away from our collusion with wealth, status, power and violence? That minority status might be good for the Christian community in the West?

6. It was hard for the exiles in Babylon to believe that exile might be good for them, but that's what Jeremiah told them: God has led you into exile; God is at work among you.

7. We have the benefit of hindsight. Exile was formative for the people of Israel:

(a) After centuries of persistent idolatry they finally discovered God was bigger than they had ever imagined – with them in Babylon as well as in their homeland. Idolatry never plagued them again.

(b) Their temple had been destroyed – the place they thought was God's special dwelling place – but they found that they could worship God anywhere.

(c) They thought they were God's favourites and looked down on others – but now they learned that God loved Babylonians too.

(d) Far from their homeland they collected together their scriptures and formed what we now know as the Old Testament – telling their history in a way that made sense of their current experience.

8. Who knows what we might discover as exiles today – if we hold our nerve, trust in God's good purposes, settle down and seek shalom for our society? Christendom may be gone, but we might rediscover a more authentic way of being Christian – not just for our own sake but for the sake of our society.

9. Not an easy message today. These are tough Scriptures. But this might just be what we need to hear and ponder.