

4th Sunday of Lent

A couple of months after my father died, I asked my mother how she was doing. She said, "I stopped watching television. I don't know why. I just haven't turned it on. And I don't miss it." That was fine. Everybody grieves in a different way. Something inside her wanted silence or simplicity, so she just went with it. In grief, many people stop doing what used to bring happiness. They may stay home, eat less, downsize their possessions. When we lose something we thought was essential, losing some inessential things is easier and fitting. When you've suffered a loss, if people invite you to do something that you enjoyed in the past, you may say, "No, I just don't feel like that right now." Those who love you may feel helpless to make things better, or even hurt at the rejection.

The loss behind today's responsorial psalm pertains to homeland. Our first readings during Lent have moved us through salvation history - from Noah to Abraham to Moses. Today we come to the Babylonian captivity. Generations after Israel entered the promised land and built the temple, enemies "burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon." That same passage also tells about the end of the captivity, but today's psalm is a lament for the worst crisis in Israel's history. Psalm 137 is one of the saddest prayers in the bible. It's hard to recommend it because of the way it ends: a horrific request for the violent destruction of the enemy's children. Today's verses omit that ending out of sensitivity, but there's plenty of grief left behind.

The people from Jerusalem are now in Babylon, crying. They sit by a river, as if their own tears are making it flow. They know some great songs from the temple in Jerusalem. But in their grief, they just couldn't sing. They hung up their harps on poplars. The Babylonians thought the people should get over their sorrow. "'Sing to us,' they said, 'one of Sion's songs.'"

Well, it was like telling someone who just lost a spouse, "Get over it. Dress up. Sing a song." But when you're grieving, you just can't do all those things. For an Israelite, those songs were sacred. They required a temple. They weren't entertainment for enemies. Psalm 137 goes, "O how could we sing the song of the Lord on foreign soil?" To pluck the harp with their hand, and sing the words with their tongue - that would be like forgetting their homeland. "If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. O let my tongue cleave to my palate."

The people get out of this. Babylon almost miraculously got a new leader, Cyrus, who said, "Enough is enough. Let them go home." And they went back to the land they loved. But this psalm captures a moment of loss that many people can relate to: when you just can't do what normally makes you happy.

During Lent, in accepting our penances, we choose not to do what normally makes us happy. We give up some pleasures, we contribute to the poor, we devote time to God in prayer. That makes a good Lent. It may also rehearse grief. When we do suffer a loss and feel that we can't go on the way we did, it may be OK to do without. It helps us reevaluate what really matters and what leads us on to deeper peace. Whenever we feel that we're from Jerusalem but we're stuck in Babylon, grief can lead to joy, but for a while it may just need to be grief.

Sunday, March 11, 2018