

Sunday December 13 2020

ADVENT 3 YEAR B

‘For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations’. *Isaiah 61.11*

As we continue our Advent pilgrimage this week through the desert, with the cries of prophets echoing around us, I am missing the songs of the psalmists. While we are unable to sing together, we have printed the text of favourite hymns each week to hum along to or selected youtube recordings from around the globe to sample. Before the outbreak of this cruel pandemic, we sang or said an Old Testament psalm in church every Sunday, usually cantored by David Millington or another of St Peter’s Singers. I am missing singing in church and I am missing the spirituality of the Book of Psalms.

Listen to the words of Psalm 126 set for this Sunday.

The ancient Israelites, freed from captivity in Babylon, sang these songs of liberation on their journey back to Jerusalem. Imagine the songs we will sing when we are liberated from the terrors of this pandemic...

The Lord has done great things for us
And we are glad indeed.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
Then were we like those who dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongue with shouts of joy.

Have you ever had that feeling of not quite believing how happy you are?

Those who sowed with tears
Will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
Will come again with joy shouldering their sheaves.

Over and over again the Bible bears witness to a God who makes a habit of surprise endings, especially those that involve bringing life out of death. Psalm 126 is one of these stories of God’s surprises. The psalmist reminds us that even the dry watercourses of the desert can

turn into raging torrents when the rainy season comes. In the stony places we need to remember that God is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine.

Prophets used poetry and performance to attract attention and get their message across. The poetry of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah offers some of the most memorable texts and images of the whole Advent-Christmas tradition.

In all the words and all the voices that daily bombard us, it can be helpful to focus on a mantra. The ancient Christian mantra – *ma-ra-na-tha* - meaning *Come, Our Lord* in Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus), which we hear again and again in our Advent hymns and prayers, offers a profound reminder that God is forever moving towards us, longing to embrace us like lost children.

Any form of continuously repeated words that sustain us spiritually can be used as a mantra. The Letters of St Paul to the early Christian communities around the Mediterranean world are embedded with many short sayings that would have been intended for this form of prayer.

Rejoice always...pray without ceasing...give thanks in all circumstances...Do not quench the Spirit...test everything...hold fast to what is good...abstain from every form of evil. *1 Thessalonians 5. 16-24*

We may use our own mantra – words we remember in our minds, souls and bodies, words to help us focus on what matters most. Perhaps we all have a mantra given to us by God? Perhaps we have been given a mantra/a message to share with others?

I am grateful to Monica James for a mantra she shared with me early on in lockdown – ‘Just do your best and the Lord will do the rest’. I gather her next door neighbour, Glenda, has picked it up too!

The poet and priest, Jim Cotter, has written his own version of the psalms which speak powerfully still to contemporary life. He adds a short prayer to each one. These are the words he uses at the end of Psalm 126.

Restore the years, O God, that we have lost, that the locusts have eaten. Give to us the future that we thought we should never see. Make of the present moment a first fruit of true liberation. Even when we feel exiled, locked in, despairing, move secretly within us and among us, and without us realising it, keep us moving on our journey to your city.

Amen.