

BIBLE READINGS: Psalm 126 Mark 10:46-52

SERMON

When I was growing up, I learnt not to cry – I don't think my parents taught me this rule – I just sort of picked it up as a boy – tears and emotions were girly things – not for boys.

I remember a very sacred moment that started me on the long road to recovery from this mistaken belief. My father and I were watching an old movie called *Captains Courageous*, starring Spencer Tracy. There is a moment in the film that is truly touching and sad. I was trying really hard not to wipe my eyes – I had started to cry – it was that moving. All of a sudden I heard a snuffle – I turned to see my father – tears rolling down his cheeks. I learnt at that moment – that boys can cry – there is no shame in it!

Having said that, this week's psalm is all weepy and emotional. The psalmist apparently has no regard for good manners or propriety. Psalm 126 reads like the interior of a manic person.

Laughing, shouting, crying, shouting, weeping, shouts of joy.

None of it is ignored, all of the emotions are part of the song, all honoured. The psalm cares nothing for appearances or how they might be judged. No keeping his words to the the safe centre of the emotional spectrum. It doesn't say: "First we were all a little upset, but then we felt pretty good." No. Instead it says: "First we were drenched in tears, then we were shouting for joy."

The psalm ends in joy, but it doesn't skip the sadness to get there. The poem is a journey home, and part of that journey is through the valley of shadows and pain. The pain and trouble cannot be bypassed, because it is exactly at that point of honest crying out that the future is opened to something new.

That is the logic of the psalm, and even the logic of the Gospel.

Notice the little detail in the psalm about the stream-beds in the Negev. "Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negev." The Negev desert is in the southern part of Israel, to the north are mountains, and in the short rainy season the water runs off the mountains and into the desert. The water doesn't gently flow into the Negev, slowly filling the stream beds.

It floods the place!

Every year people would be killed as the watercourses, once dry, were overrun with rushing water. In previous times in Israel's history before the plains eroded, this flood would spill into the farmlands and sustain the crops for the growing season.

So when the psalmist pleads for the Negev to fill with water, the expectation is that God will bring the rain which will in turn bring the harvest. But the next verse mentions no rain. Instead it says, "May those who sow in tears."

So much sadness that it could flood a desert.

Psalm 126 is what we call a song of ascents. It is one of the psalms that would be sung on the way up to Jerusalem and to the Temple during the high holy days. The psalms functioned like a hymn book. Each served a purpose, and the songs of ascents were the travelling songs.

In one of the stories of those high holy days, we are told that people would come into the Temple Mount through a main gate and create a huge line that went around the outer perimeter, which would wrap several kilometres around. Everyone lined up in one direction, moving toward the centre. This would be one of only a handful of times each year when all of Israel would gather together. People would see relatives and friends they had missed for months. They would catch up on each other's lives. She had a baby, he got married, they planted a new crop.

But if someone was in mourning, if their heart had broken to pieces during those months apart, then they did not walk the line with everyone else. They would walk the Temple mount in the other direction, against traffic. In the sight of all of Israel.

No one could ignore it, and they therefore told about their grief by putting one foot in front of the other.

But the psalmist does not get lost in sadness. Instead all of that pain somehow makes room for joy. One relies on the other. The psalm believes the absurd logic that tears can change things.

When Jesus approached the city of Jerusalem for the first time, he climbed the Mt. of Olives, one foot in front of the other, and as he looked out over the city, he began to weep.

What was Jesus sowing with his tears? Did he chant this little psalm as he crested the hill, looking over the holy city and realising what was left to do?⁸⁵²⁵⁵

First the crying, then the joy.

First Friday, then Sunday.

First the dying, then new life.

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