

Pastoral Letter August 2013

Hanging our harps upon the willows

These words are immediately familiar to us, coming as they do from a very poignant verse in Psalm 137. This psalm speaks the language of tears, sobs and broken hearts. God's people are in exile in Babylon, on account of their multiple unfaithfulnesses to his covenant. They are now experiencing its bitter fruits as they remember Zion and its lost joys. To make matters worse, their captors are mocking them, and trying to get them to sing 'one of the songs of Zion'. This they cannot do, and they speak of themselves hanging up their harps (or lyres) upon the willows, by Babylon's waters. The weeping willows with their drooping branches seemed to weep and mourn as they did. They ask, 'How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign/strange land?'

Isn't this a precise mirror of our own circumstances and feelings? We too, with deep and heartfelt sadness, feel increasingly that we are living in a strange land. It is our own land, yet we scarcely belong any longer. So much is changing for the worse. In the highest places of the land the things of God are being dismantled, one by one. Most recently, as well we know, the Houses of Parliament have voted – for this is what it amounts to – to overturn the Bible and rewrite the dictionary, where marriage is concerned. Restricting ourselves for a moment to the letter 'd', the present days in our land are dark, dismal, desperate, desolate, dire, drastic, degenerate, depressing, discouraging, disconsolate, distressing and dreadful.

The language of hanging our harps upon the willows suits us very well. It expresses our emotions, pains and sorrows at all the gross dishonouring of God and his Word that is taking place all around us. So how do we respond? In particular, what are we to recall? Precisely this: despite all these woeful changes, certain things do not change.

God does not change. He never will. He is still high and holy and inhabiting eternity. He is the God who works righteousness and justice. He will not be mocked. As much as ever, he remains the rock, stronghold and portion of his people. He hears our cries, and will answer us in his own times and ways.

The Bible does not change. It never will. It is God's eternal word which is also his abiding, fresh and ever-contemporary word. It requires no apologies from us, and will admit of no alterations. Our business is to believe it, proclaim it, and, the Lord being our helper, live it.

The gospel does not change. It is still 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes'. The almighty and heavenly power of the Holy Spirit inhabits it. It is full of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is all-sufficient, altogether lovely, and 'the same yesterday and today and forever'. He alone is the very Saviour the sinner needs and the child of God has!

The true church does not change. She remains the bride of Christ, is a dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit, and is charged with guarding the good deposit. At her best she is 'awesome as an army with banners' – the less she is like the world, the more effective she is in the world.

Eternity does not change. Heaven remains real, and so does hell. So they shall. Heaven beckons and hell threatens.

So – however difficult we find it – let us seek grace not to be overwhelmed with the oppression of present things, but to hold fast to those things which are unchanging. That way, we shall yet 'sing the LORD's song' again, even in this increasingly strange land.