

**Reflection 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020 (Circuit podcast)**  
**How can we sing a new song in a strange land?**

I'm sure many of you can remember the Boney-M song,

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down  
Yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion  
There the wicked  
Carried us away in captivity  
Required from us a song  
Now how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

Perhaps some of you have the tune in your head already – I certainly do.

The song captured the theme of exile in the Psalm we have just heard (Psalm 137) the Israelite people are far from home and their hope is gone.

The Israelite people are in exile, and are uncertain about what the future will bring. For those forced to live in Babylon, the future seemed a black hole into which the people were destined to disappear. A century-and-a-half previously, many citizens of Judah's sister kingdom Israel had been similarly deported, had lost their identity, and had faded into the mists of history--the so-called lost tribes of Israel. The exile was more than just a crisis of physical suffering and communal identity it also brought with it a crisis of faith. The key symbols of Judean faith--Jerusalem, its temple, its people, and the Davidic monarchy--had been destroyed.

How can they keep on singing the Lord's song when everything is so alien and bewildering?

We might empathise particularly well with those feelings right now.

I wonder how many of us have experienced the feeling of being lost and overwhelmed by the current crisis. There is much fear, anxiety and anger around and we have lots of questions. How did it come to this? How is there so much uncertainty? When will we be able to go back to our buildings? When will we too be able to sing the Lord's song in a familiar place? When will all this end?

Following government guidance issued this week it certainly seems unlikely that we will be singing for some time.

It is said that in the face of a crisis that people often initially have a great sense of heroism, of getting on with it, of serving neighbours, of celebrating heroes and championing the cause of self-sacrifice and giving. However, after this period, however long that lasts, there can then be a sense of disillusionment and people feel overwhelmed, unhappy, far from home, desperate for a sense of normality. Then there is more anxiety and anger. Perhaps we have reached that place now.

At the Methodist Conference this week there was some discussion on what the post-Covid church will look like including conversation about what we have learnt and how this might alter our vision for the future. We reflected on our sense of disorientation and uncertainty.

Right now we stand in a place where we can look back to what has been and we realise that we are unlikely to be able to go back to exactly the same place again. We are changed. We have learnt about virtual church, about meeting remotely, acutely aware that this excludes those who do not have this facility at home. We have learnt about intentional pastoral care for one another, regular phone calls and care expressed through the kindness of strangers. We have begun to remember that the church is not the building, it is the people, the community of faith, the service and care for those who are the most vulnerable. We are aware of those who might never have come into our premises but are willing to listen to a podcast or a virtual service.

So, as we find ourselves in this mid-space, we are encouraged to look forward to what the promised land might mean for us now. We will need to be gentle with one another. We will need to be generous to one another. This week the Connexional treasurer reminded us that if we have reserves kept for a rainy day - that this is the rainy day for our church. The gales are blowing and the rain is pouring. In his words, we are not short of funds in our churches but we are short of generosity. If we have more than we need we must learn to share it with one other, in our circuits, districts and more widely.

In all these things we are aware of our own weariness, our sense of having had enough, our desperation for more human contact especially for those who have been shielding. There will be many who need to hear the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel, 'Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest. I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls'.

Rest for the teachers, the carers, the delivery drivers.

Rest for the shop assistants, the paramedics and nurses.

Rest for all those who have kept us going and will continue to do so through these times.

We give thanks for all of them and pray that they may find the rest they need.

Let us be gentle and generous with one another as we work together to discern our way forward. Despite financial troubles there was much energy about at the virtual Methodist Conference this week. Our young people spoke up loud and clear with a sense of excitement for the future. We discussed the new 'God for all' report which sets out new vision for our church. There are reasons to be hopeful! Our new Methodist President, the Revd Richard Teal, encouraged us to re-orientate, to discover who we can be for this time and place and our sense of mission for each of our churches and communities, as we journey onward together. The theme for this year is 'the best of all is God is with us', the final words of John Wesley. Indeed, may we remember and hold this in our hearts as we hope for the future, the best of all is that God is with us, yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

A prayer from the Revd. Richard Teal

Let us pray.

Gracious God,  
Many of us feel like your people of the past,  
in exile.  
Teach us all to sing a new song,  
where we can celebrate your absolute faithfulness to humanity  
and your created order  
come what may.  
May this reorientation to new life be found  
in the cross and resurrection of your Son  
and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Summon us to the life, vision and values of your kingdom  
and may we be strengthened to flourish  
and given confidence to play our part  
In the new life that you are constantly bringing into being.  
For the best of all is God is with us. Amen