

Psalm 126

1

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

2

Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
'The Lord has done great things for them.'

3

The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

4

Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.

5

Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6

Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

Joy and social breakdown Psalm 126

If you've heard the last two sermons you'll know that during advent we're following a theme of homelessness, and related issues like poverty. This week I want to talk about social breakdown. This is something that's gone on throughout history of course in different ways, but I think the West at the moment is on a downward slope from the relative peace and prosperity of the postwar years via the cultural revolution of the sixties towards an increasingly capitalist based system since the late 70s. This has created an ever widening gap between rich and poor, and at the same time the large scale rejection of christianity and christian values has resulted in a widespread loss of genuine community, certainly in towns and cities although not so much in rural areas like Sussex.

Some statistics that bear this out are for instance the increase in one person households. The number of people living alone in the UK went up by 16% to 7.7 million between 1997 and 2017, although the UK population increased by 13%. This now represents nearly 30% of households. By 2039, the number of one-person households is projected to rise to 10.7 million. This will obviously increase the problem of loneliness.

And the divorce rates are a contributor to this: 107,000 in 2019, an 18% year on year rise from 2018, although it had been falling before that. But compare to 15,000 in 1945 and 500 in 1900.

This all results in a much more fragmented and disparate society with families often spread over 2 or even more households. The prison population is now 88,000, and it's doubled since 1990, although crime figures in general are down, which reflects an increase in imprisonment in preference to other forms of rehabilitation.

Another significant shift has been the change in Sunday shopping laws and the subsequent 24/7 consumer culture which largely prioritises profit at the expense of what are arguably more important issues. Some of you will remember Tony Hancock's famous half hour on the subject of boring Sunday afternoons with nothing to do. "Stone me what a life. What's the time? 3 o'clock? Only 9 hours 'til it's Monday again". Many of us would probably love a return to that, particularly those who have to work all weekend away from their families.

I think what 2020 has taught us as a nation is how important a loving community is to us as a way of maintaining health and wellbeing in general. Contact with other people (physical not digital!) is good, in fact it's vital for all of us, and when it was removed we realised what it meant to us. The homeless have a really strong sense of community – when we ran a Night Church in Hastings we were struck by how well they all supported each other.

One of the main messages of the bible and of Jesus's focus on the kingdom of God is how the mission of God is about building and growing community. It's about healing and restoration.

Physical and spiritual and emotional restoration, of individuals and of the society around them. The heart of which is the restoration of our individual relationships with God, because He created each of us to live our lives with Him at the centre. When we systematically deviate from this as individuals and as a society we discover that things gradually begin to fall apart. The Psalm we heard is a psalm about joy and restoration, about the people of Israel returning home from exile and giving thanks to God for deliverance. If you think about the meaning of joy it's easy just to describe it as a feeling of elation, maybe something that fades away quickly in the face of reality. But here in verse 3 they're 'filled' with joy. So what we teach is just this, that God's passion is for us to be filled with joy, and fulfilled – full- filled as people, which is a better description of what joy is. Joy is an underlying thankfulness to God which sustains us through our suffering and struggles. St Paul says this: (1 Thess 5:16-18) *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks **in all circumstances**; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* Thankfulness in all circumstances leads to joy. A knowledge deep down that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Verses 5 and 6 seem to be a foretaste of Jesus' compassion for the people who seemed to him like sheep without a shepherd, and also an image of those who go out with the gospel message. *5 Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.*

So Jesus sowed with tears, he sacrificed himself and reaped an unimaginable harvest.

But the line that really struck me in this psalm was verse 1:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. **We were like those who dreamed.***

This is all about vision, about the way things have been, but also about the way things could be. I think this is the word for today. Where much of the Old Testament and actually, church history, seems to be to do with an image of the warlike Yahweh, the much stronger message comes from the prophets like Isaiah, and the poets like the Psalmists. So we need to be like those who dream. We can't afford to maintain the status quo, and do what we've always done. The world is a dramatically different place to what it was 20 years ago. Especially after this year God is calling us to dream up better ways forward, to start rearranging our priorities, to come up with new ways of sharing the good news which follow Jesus' outline for living in the sermon on the mount. People will notice. They noticed what the Bruderhof community did for the village last night.

We must begin to put the restoration of our communities first.

We must obey the command to look after God's creation.

But above all to turn our life as a nation and our lives as individuals in a better direction and follow Jesus call to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves. Amen