

“Friend and neighbour you have taken away”

Even at the beginning of Lent, just a few weeks ago, there were passages like the one above from the Psalms which seemed to describe things remote from our modern lives. How quickly things changed.

You have taken away my friends, ...
Imprisoned, I cannot escape. *Ps. 88*

Bring my soul out of this prison
and then I shall praise your name. *Ps. 142*

When did I ever feel imprisoned or friendless before? Suddenly I am both. I feel abandoned, unsettled and bewildered:

I cry aloud to God,
cry aloud to God that he may hear me.

In the day of my distress I sought the Lord.
My hands were raised at night without ceasing;
my soul refused to be consoled.
I remembered my God and I groaned.
I pondered and my spirit fainted.

You withheld sleep from my eyes.
I was troubled, I could not speak.
I thought of the days long ago
and remembered the years long past.
At night I mused within my heart.
I pondered and my spirit questioned.

Will the Lord reject us for ever?
Will he show us his favour no more?
Has his love vanished for ever?
Has his promise come to an end?
Does God forget his mercy
or in anger withhold his compassion?

I said: “This is what causes my grief;
that the way of the Most High has changed.” *Ps.77*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,
Lord, hear my voice! *Ps. 130*

Have you utterly rejected Judah?
Does your soul loathe Sion?
Why have you smitten us
so that there is no healing for us? *Jer. 14:17-21*

All my plans for the near future have had to be cancelled and no-one can say when the uncertainty will be over. Isaiah 38 has some vivid imagery of a life interrupted:

I said, in the noontide of my days I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.

I said, I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living;
I shall look upon man no more
among the inhabitants of the world.

My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me
like a shepherd's tent;

like a weaver I have rolled up my life;
he cuts me off from the loom.

From day to night you bring me to an end;
I cry for help until morning ...

The feeling of being in exile, cut off from what is dear and familiar, is echoed in Ps. 137:

By the waters of Babylon
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion ...
How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

Life has lost its zest, making new plans seems futile. Who cannot be saddened, thinking of the silence which now reigns in the churches, to remember the joy of celebrating the Mass when they read:

These things will I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd
into the house of God,
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving,
the throng wild with joy.

Why are you cast down, my soul,
why groan within me?
Hope in God; I will praise him still,
my saviour and my God. *Ps 42*

For now my soul is cast down. How shall we sing the Lord's song in this foreign land? Are not these very words - these words of sorrow, bereavement and longing - a song to the Lord? Blessed are those who mourn (*Matt.5: 4*).

GS