

**07.10.2018**

**(Trinity 19 – Choral Evensong)**

All Saints' Church, High Wycombe

**Psalm 126**

MESSAGE: those who sow in tears will reap in joy

INTENTION: to encourage people to keep fighting for justice

'Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy'

These words from psalm 126 which the choir sung so beautifully for us this evening, are all too easy to gloss over. They can seem somehow 'incidental detail' or even just a casual, throw-away comment on a whimsical wish that all will work out ok in the end.

But some would argue this is one of the hardest lines in any of the psalms (perhaps even among the hardest in the Bible) to accept, let alone to believe.

Because we, individually and as a society, still find it hard to **believe the testimony of hope** in the face of despair especially, it seems, when that testimony comes through the voice of the oppressed, powerless, outcast or simply those who we'd prefer stayed quiet for our own convenience.

Anyone who has seen any news the last few weeks will recall the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford at the investigation into the accusations against Brett Kavanaugh. And it would be easy to mistake the proceedings as one in which the alleged victim was on trial. But whether or not you believe her version of events, or dismiss them as many voting members chose to, Christine has inadvertently become the exemplar of one of those voices who many would prefer to stay quiet for their own convenience – even being openly mocked by president Trump.

And after the controversial election to the supreme court took place, Christine may not yet feel that she (like many other survivors of assault) can reap in songs of joy but my God do they know what it is like to sow seeds of hope through tears. And as one among that number, I can testify that the only thing which gives courage to any of us to speak truth to power (even when we are terrified and ignored) is the **hope, the sure and certain hope**, that one day that which we sow in tears now, *we will reap* in joy in days to come.

But that process - from tears to joy – is not in the hands of the victimised and oppressed, however much courage they may have in speaking out or working on themselves to deal with the impact of their wounding. That process (and the speed at which it effects **real** change) is in the hands of each and every one of us. Because it's about whether **we** believe the testimony of hope *enough* to really live it out in our lives and communities... whether we want the Kingdom of God to come *enough*, that we let it affect the choices we make - be that the way we treat people on the bus or how we vote in nominations to the supreme court.

Do we believe in a God who will grow the seeds of justice we sow? And do we have enough hope to keep tilling the ground, even when that growth seems invisible or fragile? Do we believe in God's promise *enough* to let it come to fruition and allow our hope in that promise to shape the kind of society we choose to build together?

And will it be a society built on truth and justice and compassion after the example of Christ?

Or will it be a society governed by our own desperate attempts to fend off anything which challenges our sense of self-righteous positioning; founded on the notion that we 'earned it' so we deserve to hang on to it, whatever the cost to our brothers and sisters?

The Psalmist tonight knows which kind of society they choose to build:

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

Then was our mouth filled with laughter  
and our tongue with songs of joy.

Then they said among the nations.

'The Lord has done great things for them'.

The Lord has indeed done great things for us,  
and therefore we rejoiced.

Restore again our fortunes, O Lord,  
as the river beds of the desert.

**Those who sow in tears  
shall reap with songs of joy.**

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed,  
will come back with shouts of joy,  
bearing their sheaves with them.

This psalm is about choosing to build a society on the foundation of the faithfulness of God and God's promise of **restoration**.

'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, (writes the psalmist) then were we like those who dream... Restore again our fortunes, O Lord...'

This is the appeal of a people who know what it is like to lose everything and to have to rely on God. Of a people who lost all status, all influence, all land and wealth, who had to leave their homes, who were taken captive, who were in exile, oppressed, marginalised and blamed for their own misfortune.

I wonder if any of that list sounds familiar to victims of violence and oppression today?

All God's people had to go on in their time of weeping in the desert was **hope**; hope in the promise that God *would* restore them and use them to make a world that is more just, more equitable; more infused with love and more like God intended the world to be from the very beginning.

They saw God bring them through and when they faced hardship again they continued to rely and hope on God's promise that they would be restored once again – that their testimony that 'the Lord has done great things for us' would once more ring true and be heard.

But the story of the Psalms is that God needed this nation (even for all their own faults and failings) to *dare to dream*, to believe even in the face of adversity, that that world which they hoped for could be a reality and to shape their lives and dealings in such a way that God was able to use them to bring that dream into effect.

But that hope could not be carried solely by courageous individuals, it needed the whole community of faith to carry the vision because the tears they'd cried in the desert still stained their cheeks, they needed time to grieve and process and I like to think of the psalms as part of that processing.

But this people were not dreaming of consolation or compensation for their hardship – it was restoration they dreamed of. And restoration is a far more multi-dimensional process; reinstating human dignity, justice and health.

Some biblical interpretations record the phrase the psalmist used 'like those who dream' as 'as those comforted' or 'like sick people who are cured' or 'people renewed in health'.

But as many of us will know, the process of restoration and healing from hurt and trauma can be far from straightforward: it can be a messy, even invasive, process and one with many setbacks along the way. But if healing is about being restored to health and dignity, then very few people find that they are simply returned to how they were before. More often than not, they are changed by the process.

And if individuals are changed by the process then when society becomes sick, it is no good simply restoring it to a former state before it succumbed to the pressures in its environment and started wounding its own members.

The restored individual, in their new state of being, needs the community around them may need to make accommodations and healthier choices in order for there to be a lasting difference.

We all need to give ourselves a serious health check and start attending to the collective wellbeing of all society, because it's only when the whole body is functioning well, that it can begin to heal from the hurts we inflict upon one another.

This isn't 1 person on a diet trying to resist the urge for an extra biscuit – this is everyone in the house clearing out the cupboards and making sure all the options that are available are healthy ones to choose from.

The whole thing has to be healed – the environment has to be changed so that we can be restored not to the old, but to the new: to God's intention for us and our lives. If we are seeking to go from tears to joy, then simply putting someone back in a situation where they have the potential to be victimised again is madness. We need to eliminate the cause of victimisation and the structures which support the injustice behind the tears which we make each other cry .....

.....and *that* requires change.

Big change.

The kind of change which actually demands something of all of us.

The kind of change which sacrifices its own vision to follow God's and its own self-importance to build up the other.

And as God needed the historic nation of Israel to effect change in the world around *them*.... God needs **us, the Church** to effect that change in the world around us today.

Because God's vision isn't just a 'nicer' world where everyone is marginally more polite to each other – It's the restoration of all humanity (in body, mind and spirit)

And Jesus didn't say, 'well that's nice but my part in that vision might cost me election to the board of Temple authorities' .... **He said: 'I believe in it so much that I will die to make it happen'.**

Jesus loved us too much to let this world stay the same and to let us keep inflicting injustice upon each other, which is why he fulfilled his promise that death and sin will not have the last word and things **can** and **will** change: that because of the Resurrection the seeds of hope sown even through tear-stained faces will not fall on stony ground.

You may or may not be called upon in your life to die for what you believe in, but if you want to know what it's like to fear for your life simply by speaking the truth to those with power, then ask Chrisine Blasey Ford or any survivor of abuse.

And the reason we still have people who miraculously find the courage to speak out is because somehow, they believe that, however distant that hope may seem at this time, that it *is* possible for those who sow in tears to one-day reap in songs of joy if only we follow God's vision for the restoration of humanity.

And they're right. It's not a fanciful wish, it's God's **promise** to us, made real in the Resurrection and made known when we have the courage to shape this world and our lives like we really believe it.

Amen.