

WEEK OF CHRISTIAN UNITY BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 5

Singing the Lord's song as strangers in the land

Readings

Ps 137:1-4 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

Lk 23:27-31 Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children

Reflection

The lament of the psalmist originates in the exile of Judah in Babylon, however, the pain of exile is one that reverberates across time and culture. Perhaps the psalmist shouted this refrain towards the heavens. Perhaps each verse was given voice between deep sobs of grief. Perhaps this poem emerged with a shrug of indifference that can only come from living within injustice and feeling powerless to effect any meaningful change. However the words were brought forth, the heartache of this passage finds resonance in the hearts of those who are treated as strangers in other lands or in their own lands.

The demand in the psalm comes from the oppressor to smile and make merry, to sing the songs of a “happy” past. That demand has come to marginalized people throughout history. Whether it was in minstrel shows,¹¹ or Geisha dances,¹² or Wild West cowboy and Indian shows,¹³ oppressors have often demanded that oppressed people perform happily to ensure their own survival. Their message is as simple as it is cruel; your songs, your ceremonies, your cultural identity, that which makes you sacredly unique, is only allowable so long as it serves us.

In this psalm generations of the oppressed are given their voice. How could we sing the Lord’s song when we are strangers in our own land? We sing not for our captors but to praise God. We sing because we are not alone for God has never abandoned us. We sing because we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. The ancestors and saints inspire us. They encourage us to sing songs of hope, songs of freedom, songs of liberation, songs of a homeland where a people is restored.

Christian Unity

Luke’s Gospel records that people, many of them women, follow Jesus even as he carries his cross to Calvary. This following is faithful discipleship. Furthermore, Jesus recognises their struggles and the suffering that they will have to endure in faithfully carrying their own crosses.

Thanks to the ecumenical movement, Christians today share hymns, prayers, reflections and insights across traditions. We receive them from one another as gifts borne of the faith and loving discipleship, often enduring struggles, of Christians from different communities than our own. These shared gifts are riches to be treasured and give witness to the Christian faith we share.

Challenge

How do we raise up the stories of ancestors and saints who lived among us and have sung songs of faith, hope, and liberation from captivity?

Prayer

God of the oppressed,
Open our eyes to the harm that continues to be inflicted
On our sisters and brothers in Christ.
May your Spirit give us the courage to sing in unison,
And raise our voices with those whose suffering is unheard.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

11. Thought to be the first original form of popular American entertainment, minstrel shows originated in the 1830s as a combination of blackface, a form of theatrical makeup employed by primarily White people, and theatrical productions depicting derogatory appearances and personas of African Americans. Yet, in the 1890s, African American artists “blackened up,” sang, danced, and discussed provocative issues like sex in the “colored minstrel shows” while feeling the added responsibility to counter the stereotypes of black identity as laughable, primitive and overly sensual, leading them to develop a self-presentation on stage that balanced racist stereotypes and political commentary.

12. In the 17th century, the role of the geisha emerged in Japan as an “artist” who entertained with dance, music, conversation, and other acts in various tea ceremonies.

13. After the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn, Buffalo Bill Cody founded the Wild West Show, a touring pageant of all things western including a recreation of General Custard's Last Stand. The biggest draw was the real life Native Americans who appeared domesticated instead of savage, participating in the shows while the American government was still engaging in battle in Indian territory.