

Oct 2, 2022 – NKMC Online – Singing the Lord’s Song in a strange land

Pre-service

O come, O come, Immanuel (StF 180)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRDjVh2uCMw>

When we are living, we in the Lord (StF 485)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q0fEEBJtv8&t=43s>

Come, all who look to Christ today – StF 678

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuVZs6uF9uM> (poor recording)

We come from the mountains – StF 417

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3i3-R0nNHCI>

==

Call to worship

By the Babylonian rivers we sat down in grief and wept (StF 694)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjGPfRgI6gg&t=45s>

Prayer

Psalm 137 and Intro to interview

Interview with Oscar Siu (Chinese Lay Pastor) – singing the Lord’s song in a strange land

Intro to hymn

Hear the call of the Kingdom – StF 407

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIPxUNOrTYU&t=19s>

Prayers

May the God of hope go with us every day (SoF 2442)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL2rpQtbo1I>

Benediction

I welcome you to this service of worship today with the N Kent Methodist Circuit.
I'm Bonni-Belle Pickard, the superintendent of this circuit,
And we're glad to have you worshipping with us this day.

In many parts of the Christian world, this first Sunday of October
Is known as World-Wide Communion Sunday.
Although we won't be celebrating online communion today,
I remember as a child feeling very special to think that people all over the world
Were worshipping together on this day –
Even if we were separated by time and geography,
Still, we were all united by worshipping the God
Who was the same in every time and place.

As I've become an adult, I've become more aware of some of the differences
In how we worship –
Indeed, even within Christian churches – even within Methodist churches! –
there are many variations from one congregation to another.
And yet it is the same God we worship.

For many years, it was important to me to recognize those similarities –
And it still is important to remember our common goals and patterns –
But I've also learned much more about our differences
And how those differences – rather than separating us –
Can make us stronger, can make us wiser,
Can enrich our worship experience.

It's with that in mind that I've asked our new Chinese Lay Pastor, Oscar Siu,
To participate in this service with me.
Oscar is Chinese himself – but still somewhat unique in that his mother is Mandarin,
While his father is Cantonese.
Oscar has also lived in many places –
Mainland China; Hong Kong; Boston, Massachusetts; Aberdeen; Cambridge,
To name a few.

Many of you will know that I've also lived many places:
Florida; S India; Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham (W Midlands); London;
And now Maidstone, Kent.

The question Oscar and I will be exploring together today is this:
How can we sing the Lord's Song in a strange land?

You might recognize that line as coming from one of the Psalms, Psalm 137.
We'll be exploring that Psalm later in this service.

To start our worship today,
I invite you to listen to a hymn written on that Psalm
And set to a Latvian tune.

==

Prayer:

Lord of all times and all places,
Sometimes we find ourselves in confusion –
The familiar places are sometimes not so familiar anymore –
 There are new neighbours,
 Some have difference customs.
 There are new challenges.

We're not sure how to react to people we meet
 Who speak in different accents
 Or who speak in languages we can't understand at all.
We see people who dress differently
 Or act differently,
And we're not sure what to do.

We want to be a generous and welcoming people –
We want to be hospitable,
 But sometimes that's hard.
And sometimes we feel overwhelmed
 With all the difference.

Lord of all times and all places,
 Keep reminding us that we are all your children.
That you love each of us dearly
 And you want us to love each other.

Keep reminding us to regard each other
 As gifts from you –
Gifts that can help us understand ourselves better
 Gifts that can help us understand each other better.
 Gifts that can help us understand you better.

Be with us, Lord,
 Pull us back when we begin to think we have all the answers.
 Challenge us when we insist everyone do things our way.
 Help us listen to each other, Lord.
Give us patience and perseverance to learn from each other. Amen.

Psalm 137: 1-4

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!'
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

==

Many of us joining in worship today will consider ourselves
To belong in the places where we live.
Some of us have come from other places,
But even then, many of us have lived here long enough
To call this home.

Psalm 137 is a lament from people in exile –
A people who found themselves in a place they didn't call home –
And perhaps didn't even *want* to call home –
They were there against their will.
They had been defeated at home by outsider invaders...
And taken away to live with their captors in Babylon.

This particular situation has not happened to many of us –
Most of us who have come to call our present circumstances 'home'
Have done so mainly by our own choice.
It is important that we spend some time considering what it's like
To be a captive in a strange land.
To be forced to take on new lifestyles,
New customs,
Learn a new language,
Abandon our cultural heritage
And find it despised and ridiculed...

At the same time, most of us will have had some time in our lives
When we have felt disconnected to what we've called home –
Perhaps we've felt despised and ridiculed in our own home.
Perhaps the words of Psalm 137 speak to us as well.

All of us, immigrants or long-time 'home folk'
Will find ourselves 'homesick' at times –
Wanting desperately for things to be 'normal' again –
But what is 'normal' – and can anything ever be 'normal' again?

For the Hebrew people in Babylon,
The normal they craved was wrapped up in the word: 'Jerusalem' –
Not just their political capital – their government and way of living
But their spiritual home – the Temple in Jerusalem being the place
Where they felt closest to God.
There they had known themselves blessed by God.
They called Jerusalem by another name: 'Zion'
Which symbolized for them God's providence:
God had brought them to Zion in safety and security,
Because they were God's people.

But now it had all gone pear-shaped –
And Jerusalem had been conquered,
And the Temple had been destroyed,
And they had been taken into exile.

Over recent years we have seen several similar conquests:

In Syria and Lebanon, the Yezdhi in Iran whose holy places were demolished
And attempts made to exterminate their populations.
More recently in Myanmar and Ukraine.

I'm sure you could think of other examples –

Where the safety and security of people has been ravaged
By groups insisting on their own control over a population...

The last line of this Psalm has often been omitted in church services –

Because it speaks of horrible vengeful violence –

The vanquished ones wanting to get revenge on their captors –

Even smashing their babies against the rocks.

We recoil against such violence in church on a Sunday morning,

But there's something very human and honest

About the desire for revenge.

When the things we cherish most have been trampled down,

We want justice to be done against the trampling ones.

The point of today's explorations is not to incite violence!

What this Psalm's gruesome ending helps us realize

Is a bit of the anger that is part of finding ourselves in unusual places

Finding ourselves in danger

Trying to find a way out of the pain...

The pain that often accompanies displacement.

One of the most effective tools for addressing this pain

Is to name it – which is what Psalm 137 and other psalms of lament do.

Naming the pain – and naming it before God.

The God who is also well-versed in being misunderstood and rejected.

Yet the God who continually yearns to share hope and healing

With all God's beloved children.

It's that healing and hope that I want to explore today with Oscar –

Especially as Oscar has begun his work with the Chinese community –

Many of whom have recently come to the UK from Hong Kong –

Others who have lived in the UK for a long time –

And done much to make it their home as well.

What I want to explore is the ways that we can find to survive –

Even to thrive – in 'strange lands' – in unusual circumstances

When everything we thought we knew or held us safe

Has been stripped away.

Interview questions –

‘We hung up our harps’ – what might that mean to someone coming into a different culture?

Trauma of captives, refugees forced out

Giving up hope of singing

And yet not destroying their harps – they might sing again

Portability of harps – for personal use

Lightweight size to hang on a willow tree

For safekeeping? Display? Not usable in this place

How do we do the things that used to give us meaning?

Wait – prayer for wisdom – look toward the future

Me – minister instead of musician

‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion’, do you think they were wanting to know about Jerusalem – the place their armies had conquered – so that they could make fun of something that was special for their captives, or where they really interested in the Hebrew culture – or maybe even in the Hebrew God?

Enemies ridiculing captives – wanted mirth

Rubbing in the fact that they’re no longer in Zion

Captors intrigued at the concept of having a faith in foreign land –

How to ask about faith of the captives – when you’re the one in charge

How do *we* ask newcomers for the gifts they could share?

What have you found most difficult about worshipping ‘in a foreign land’?

Can you tell us a bit about the need for Mandarin worship that is emerging in the Chinese congregation?

Mandarin worshippers – find English and Cantonese difficult – language difficulties

Want to sing worship songs in Mandarin

Establish regular worship and Bible study in Mandarin

Prayer language – how to enable each other to pray in our own prayer language?

Lord’s prayer – in ‘heart language’

Gifts that Chinese congregations can give to English congregations –

‘Bring the gospel back to Europe’

What the missionaries took to China – return to secularized countries

HK migrants – bring money and power – can collaborate with English –

To serve homeless, Chinese school, community work

Korean congregations set up by Korean missionaries –

Most difficult is ministering to English congregations – [phone call interrupts!]

Incarnational Christ – came in a particular context showing

‘Go to the people... start where they are... take them where they need to be.’

O God who gives us songs to sing –
And dares us to sing them
Even in strange lands

We thank you today for the songs that link us with our memories
Of how you have been alive with us in the past
We thank you for the songs that link us with people and congregations of the past
We thank you for melodies and words that come into our minds
When we least expect it --
Bringing us comfort, bringing us hope, bringing us into your presence.

We thank you as well, Lord God of us all,
That there are always more songs for us to learn,
More songs for us to sing and share.
We thank you for those who dare to share their songs with us
Songs that have been special to them in the past.
We thank you for the stories that go with the songs.
For the reminder that you give all your children songs to sing.

Lord, we consider today what songs we have been slow to hear –
The songs that we haven't considered carefully
Because they were too different or too hard to understand.

Help us listen carefully, Lord. Help us listen prayerfully.

Help us, Lord, to remember to sing our own songs as well –
Not to keep them just to ourselves
But to remember that someone else might need our song, too.

Indeed, Lord, we lift up those today who are suffering –
in our families –
in our neighbourhoods
in our congregations
in our nation
in our world...

Remind us again of what song they might need to hear.
Help us keep our 'harps' every ready to sing your praise again.

We pray in the name of the one who has sung creation into being,
Who has heard our songs of lament,
And has answered with a song of hope. Amen.

Lord's prayer in the prayer language of our hearts...