

Today's responsorial psalm, number 136, is one of the most well-known and beautiful of all the psalms. Verdi included it in his opera *Nabucco* and it became famous all over the world as 'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves' – *Va' pensiero*. Italy was still under occupation by the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time it was written and the chorus became an Italian cry for freedom. When I was a much younger man, the group Boney M also released it as a single, 'By the Rivers of Babylon'.

Psalm 136 is a poem of exile, describing the story of the Jews exiled in Babylon; however, because it is written in the past tense, most scripture scholars believe it was composed some years after the exile ended, around about 540BC. At any rate, it portrays the sad and sorrowing life of those who longed for home.

Exile is one of the most powerful themes of human existence, from the beginning to the end of it. The first exiles were Adam and Eve, driven out of Eden because of their disobedience – and humanity has been longing to get back to paradise ever since. There is a deep inner sense in every human person that where we are is not home – home is somewhere else and, in our most self-aware moments, we

realise that we yearn to return to it. We leave the warm, safe embrace of the womb and are pushed out into a world of separation and suffering. Exile is in our DNA. Most of our lives – in a thousand-and-one different ways – there’s a continuous effort to avoid facing our spiritual homesickness. Whether we realise this or not.

However, there is no need for melancholy. Today, the fourth Sunday in Lent, is called ‘Laetare Sunday’ – ‘Rejoice Sunday’ – which reminds us that the darkest hour is often just before dawn and, after the darkness, the light invariably returns. You could say that after the exile comes the homecoming. Homecoming is the entire point of us being in exile in the first place. And if this is an exile, it is not without its consolations. The light from home shines and a hundred-and-one different ways in our lives:

- the faces of those we love...
- an unexpected kind word or act...
- the unfailing love and loyalty of our pets...
- the tenderness of love between spouses...

- the shape and colour of a flower, unexpectedly glimpsed in an unlikely place... (I'm not sentimental about nature, and I've had to teach myself this. First realised it in a cyclamen)...

All these encounters are causes of joy and they show us that even now the light of home shines in the twilight of our exile.