

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 foreign powers at the time *Nabucco* 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. There is a sense in which the Jewish people have exile in their blood: millennia of persecutions and pogroms, expulsions and oppression have inevitably formed a collective sense of identity as a people without a home. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 gave the Jews their own home for the first time since God gave them

Canaan, but it continues to lack stable security. How much of a home can it be, then?

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-reflective moments, we realise that we yearn to return to it. Even before Eden, the very first expulsion and exile of humanity is being born: 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 guises – are spent, even though we may not know it, in a continuous effort to avoid facing our spiritual homesickness. Whatever outward circumstances may contribute, this innate sense of being exiled from home is the *interior* root cause of addiction. I think this is why Jesus went out of his way to be close to the socially outcast: they had looked within themselves and had seen their need – the

scribes and the Pharisees prided themselves on needing nothing and thought there was no need to look – they probably wouldn't have known how to.

In our day, Stephen Spielberg well knows how to pluck the strings of all the great themes that are found in the human heart – including exile. In the film *ET*, ET himself spends all his time wanting and trying to get back home. The longing for home is a deep, archetypal longing that has been within the person from the first time there were people around. Every outward, concrete home we make for ourselves is a reflection of that longing. It is enmeshed in every human psyche. This is why homelessness in any shape or form – personal, social, national, ethnic, religious – is so desperate. Homelessness in our society and our world is one of those sins that cries out to heaven for justice.

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 tenderness of love between spouses...
- the astonishing shape and colour of a flower, unexpectedly glimpsed in an unlikely place...
- the faces of our children or grandchildren...
- the unfailing loyalty and love of our pets...
- music that suddenly lifts us out of ourselves...
- a kind and affirming word...
- the touch of someone we love...

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.