



Will the LORD rebuild his Church?

***For the LORD will rebuild Zion and appear in his glory.
He will respond to the prayer of the destitute.***

(Psalm 102:16, 17)

Today the churches in Scotland and throughout Western Europe are facing a watershed in their history.

Steve Bruce, professor of sociology at Aberdeen University, in his book *Religion in the Modern World: from Cathedrals to Cults* (1996), argues that the secularisation of British life is widespread and irreversible.

In 2002 another Scottish academic, Callum G. Brown, announced '*The Death of Christian Britain*'. Professor Brown contends that the UK's core religious culture has been destroyed over the past 40 years.

Sadly, evidence to support these startling claims is not difficult to find:

- A 'culture of death' has been shamelessly adopted by European governments and embraced by their citizens. Since 1967 over 6 million unborn children in the UK have been aborted.
- The European Union Constitution intentionally refuses to acknowledge either the existence of Almighty God or any need to implore his blessing in the new Europe.
- Only one-third of Europeans under the age of 35 regard religion as being very or quite important. In Scotland church attendance by people under 30 declined by over half between 1994 and 2002.
- Increasingly traditional social values are undermined by political correctness on the one hand and, on the other, by a market ethic that kowtows to 'turbo capitalism'.

In such a situation, Christians often find themselves echoing the twenty-five hundred year old lament of the exiles in Babylon

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

(Psalm 137:4)

For our land is fast becoming spiritually a foreign land to us! And yet, despite the taunts of their captors, God's Old Testament exiled people *were* able to sing songs of Zion! Psalm 102 is proof of this. And the Zion of which they sung was more than the old Zion they had known in the past. It was a new Zion, which the LORD would rebuild on the ruins of the old and where his name would be declared to all the nations of the world (Psalm 102:13, 16, 21-22).

As the songs of Zion became a lens through which the exiles in Babylon could envisage a reversal of their misfortunes, enabling them to reaffirm their faith in the God of redemption and history, so also they have sustained successive generations of the people of God whenever they have had to face crises or set-backs. It was these ancient songs that inspired Augustine in 410 AD, when the unimaginable happened and Rome fell to the Goths, to write *The City of God* in which he '*saw the church as existing for the kingdom of God, the true "eternal city", beyond the rise and fall of all empires and civilisations*' (Henry Chadwick). Again, it was the songs of Zion that inspired Martin Luther in 1520 to publish *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* — an urgent call to rebuild the church of Christ on a biblical foundation.

And if for the exiles in Babylon, if for Augustine, if for Luther, the songs of Zion provided both a microscope and a telescope, helping them see more clearly the church's malady and the church's

remedy in their time, surely these songs can fulfil that very same purpose for us in Scotland at this critical time in our history! And is not this especially so at a time when the General Assembly has called on its Stewardship and Policy Committee to consult with Presbyteries and with members and adherents of the Church with a view to formulating a strategic plan for the Free Church of Scotland? I wish to propose that we prepare for the consultation with Presbyteries (due to take place during the second week of this month) by meditating on Psalm 102 and using it as a template for both our evaluation of the current situation and our exploration of the way ahead for us as a denomination. Those of us who are not members of Presbytery are similarly encouraged to use this psalm both as a prayer for the presbyterial consultations and as a guide when we are invited to respond to the Assembly's invitation to participate in this process of consultation.

There are at least three ways in which Psalm 102 can help us discern the way forward.

Analysing our plight

First, it helps us to analyse our plight. We see this in verses 1-11 where the plight of the believing community in exile is expressed figuratively in the anguished prayer of a man on the verge of death.

A string of similes underline the desperation of the people's plight.

- *My days vanish like smoke* (v. 3); *My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass* (v.11). There seems to be a sense of having only days to live!
- *My bones burn* (v. 3); *my heart is blighted and withered like grass* (v. 4); *my loud groaning* (v. 5) all suggest symptoms of fever.
- *I forget to eat my food* (v. 4); *I lie awake* (v. 7) imply that life's supportive rhythms of eating, drinking and sleeping were severely disturbed.
- *I have become like a bird alone on a roof* (v. 7) is an indicator of intense loneliness.
- *I am like a desert owl* (v. 6) hints at a sense of ceremonial uncleanness (cf. Leviticus 11:17-18).

These successive similes present a vivid picture of rock bottom morale. And metaphors such as *my bones burn like glowing embers* (v. 3) and *I eat ashes as my food* (v. 9) intensify the sense of pain, shame and distress.

The psalm acknowledges that this sore plight results not merely from the animus of enemies (v. 8), but above all from the wrath of God (v. 10). It seemed as if the believing community — personified in the death pangs of a dying man — had been tossed aside by almighty God (v. 10). Little wonder the poet describes his elegy as the prayer of the destitute (v. 17)!

And for us too, the first step in the road to church recovery is to wake up and discover that we also are destitute! The second step is to come before God asking him why the church today appears to be under judgement. And the third step is earnestly to seek the grace of repentance, turning from our sin back to the Lord. We dare not assume that our situation is any less serious than the predicament of the Babylonian exiles!

The one-liner petitions of Psalm 102 are custom-made for us! Listen to them!

- *Hear my prayer!* (v. 1)
- *Do not hide your face!* (v. 2a)
- *Turn your ear to me!* (v. 2b)

As we go through our denomination-wide consultative process, let us offer these telegram prayers continually and urgently before the Throne of Grace! For without earnest prayers of righteous people we will avail little!

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