

Psalm 126
It's coming home!

When you look back on the way **Coronavirus** has disrupted all of our lives, I wonder what you will think of as the point where you felt things were finally on the way back to normal. I think for me it might have been this year's **Wimbledon**. Even if the BBC summaries in the evenings featured great tennis players of the past sat at great distance from each other, there was finally a proper audience for the match, *ooh*-ing and *ahh*-ing their way through the twists and turns of the key points.

And close on the heels of that came "**The Euros**". It's rather curious if you check out "Euro 2021" on Google: you get a summary talking about Euro 2020, and dates in 2021. Just like the **Olympics** that we might also have been watching not too long ago are officially the 2020 Olympics ... although held in 2021.

But I'm sure you remember some of the hype with England being in those Euros. Actually getting to the **final** of the Euros. Actually getting to a **penalty shootout** at the end of European Cup Final ... with the result that was just so predictable, based on past performances when it comes to England and penalties.

And a lot of the excitement in the build-up was expressed in that song that is our title for today: **It's coming home**. Here are some of the words from 1996, when it was first released, and sung by David Baddiel, Frank Skinner and the Lightning Seeds:

*Three Lions on a shirt
Jules Rimet still gleaming
Thirty years of hurt
Never stopped me dreaming*

And a further 25 years later, the following words were proving even truer:

*So many jokes, so many sneers
But all those oh-so-nears
Wear you down
Through the years*

Finally, people were daring to dream again ... could a major football trophy be coming home to England?

All through this last year, the whole country ... the whole world! ... has been talking about getting back to normal. Something that will feel like finally coming back *home*. Somehow I think that talking about football - or a football trophy - "coming home" is a bit of a cheek, really; I don't think there's anything in the way of a *rightful* place, a *proper* place, where those trophies actually *belong*. They would be welcome, for sure, but it's not really their *home*, as such.

But we certainly do have a sense of belonging, as human beings. That word *home* is a whole lot more than just the soft-focus and chintz of **Home Sweet Home**. “Home” is something far more than simply an address, and it’s also something far more than just a stylised oldie-worldie cosiness. I suspect it’s more about people than just possessions. I think we hear a hint of it way, way back in the Bible, when we see the newly-created Eve brought by God to Adam. Do you remember the words?

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

(Genesis 2:22-23)

Do you hear that relief in Adam’s voice there, with the “at last”? Now there is a *home* to come to, because there is that special person to come *home* to. That’s the foundation for marriage as the Bible understands it, of course: one man and one woman, to the exclusion of everyone else.

But I think I also see there the foundation for bereavement, too - though that would only kick in after the Fall. Part of the ache of bereavement is that you return not quite so much to the *home*, but to an empty *house* - see how the choice of words makes that heart-wrenching difference.

And what we’re doing today is not just celebrating that annual cycle of the seasons, once again brought around to harvest time. Of course there is a certain hominess about that annual pattern. We might not do it in the way some churches **go to town** on it, but each year - even last year, when we had to do it all online - we took time to give thanks to God for that annual **harvest**. There were some of the standard songs, of course, and typically we would have a Bible reading from something like that psalm we read together earlier:

***The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.
You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.***

(Psalms 145:15-16)

But today we’re rolling something extra into the mix. For some of us, at least, there is that something extra of *being back in the Chapel again*. I know, I know, it’s only **a building**, and quite a rickety one, at that. Being quite honest, it’s not a hugely welcoming property, in its own right. If there is anything about “coming home” about this building, it’s got to be able the relationships associated with it. There’s a not very harvesty hymn that says

*My tongue repeats her vows:
“Peace to this sacred house”
- for there my friends and kindred dwell*

See, it's only the people who make it anything like a "coming home" that we're celebrating today. Not just the people alone, of course. Even more fundamental is the meeting with God, together with those people, where we can far more fully carry out those commands from all over the NT to the people of God that include the words "one another":

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

(2 Corinthians 13:11)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

(Ephesians 4:32)

And that's why we're going to go on now and read a different psalm - and sign a version of it, too - that is all about coming home. Psalm 126 (read / sing)

So here are the opening words of the psalm for you again, including the little bit of introductory context that I deliberately missed out earlier on:

A Song of Ascents.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

(Psalms 126:1)

If you're not very familiar with the Bible, that first line will puzzle you. What on earth is a "song of ascent"?

Maybe the nearest thing we have to them in our society nowadays is Christmas carols. Of course, if we're talking OT here, that's way before that first Christmas, so it's not actually celebrating that. What I mean is, a whole set of songs that have a particular association with a certain time of the year.

So these most likely come from a relatively settled time in the history of the Jewish people, when, interspersed with the rhythms of the seasons, there were special religious observances to perform. For these, people would travel from all over the nation, up to the capital Jerusalem. It's hinted at in another psalm from this set:

Jerusalem — built as a city that is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

(Psalms 122:3-4)

And that's "up", literally, because of the geography of Jerusalem, but also "up" in the sense of it being the national capital. I used to think that the "up train" from **Redruth station** was the *up* train because it was going *up*-country. I thought it was all to do with the map. So I think we confused people when we lived in Harlow, miles *north* of London, by saying we were going *down* to London. No, London is the capital. All roads lead to Rome. All trains go *up* to London.

And the people of God used to go *up* to their annual festivals in Jerusalem. Only they didn't use trains, of course, or cars. Or aeroplanes. It was much more a question of donkeys if you're lucky, and on foot if you're not. A long old journey. Certainly *days* on the road for many of them.

But one of the things that grew up, to keep them going on the way, was singing these songs together. Just like the crowds on the terraces for the **Euros**, singing together *bound* them together, with some shared, common identity. For the football fans earlier this year, "It's coming home" was more of a wish or a hope. For the Jewish pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, it was an experience. But not something based on merely a shared experience of rather meaningless words. Think of last night, the **Last Night of the Proms**. What on earth do people think of when they sing ...

*Bring me my bow of burning gold
Bring me my arrows of desire*

Does anyone actually expect to leave the Royal Albert Hall on a Chariot of Fire? What's that all about, for goodness sake?

But those songs of the Jewish pilgrims, those had meaning and historical content for the people signing them. They pointed them to things in their history scrolls.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

(Psalms 126:1)

So when we read this, we should be asking ourselves, *Well, just when DID the Lord restore the fortunes of Zion?* What's that all about? And certainly one thing that would fit is the memory of the 70 long years when the people of Israel were kept in captivity in a foreign land. We call it "the exile".

God had warned them down through centuries that he is the only true God, and they're not to make compromises - God likened it a spiritual kind of adultery, actually - by worshipping other so-called gods as well or instead. And if that warning wasn't taken to heart, there was a further warning of an ultimate sanction:

"... your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land."

(Amos 7:17)

Invasion would come. Anybody who is anybody would be deported. They would forfeit the land that God had promised to them way, way back.

But God would not forget his promise. That exile, though it would be a typical human lifetime, seventy years, would be temporary. That land is *still* their homeland. Their home might have been **mortgaged**, but it hadn't been sold. There would be a time when the people of God would come home again, having finally learned that lesson, for the most part, that they could not monkey around with God. God *plus anything else* did not work. So, referring to that return home, and using a poetic alternative name for the nation, Zion, ...

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

(Psalms 126:1)

It was too good to be true ... almost ... It was almost like the disciples responding to the resurrection of Jesus, which Luke records with a curious phrase ...

And when [Jesus] had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, ...
(Luke 24:40-41)

Yes, that's about it, back again in Jerusalem, hundreds of years earlier:

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; ...
(Psalms 126:2)

It wasn't just the Jewish people who realised this was God at work. *Other* people had to acknowledge it ... and wonder ... too:

... then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."
(Psalms 126:2)

Yes! Exactly right!

The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.
(Psalms 126:3)

And yet, don't you think that what follows is therefore a bit odd? God *has* done great things for us. We are glad. But ... there's more.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!
(Psalms 126:4)

That image might be a bit lost on you. Streams in the Negeb? That's a picture of **streams that dry up** in the summer heat, leaving just dusty valleys. But then, further up in the hills, there's **rain**, serious rain. And it runs off the hillsides and then down those dusty valleys, bringing **life** again. Abundant, lush greenery, almost a picture of resurrection. Lord, do *that*. Do that *again*.

Because even now, things are not perfect. Just think how it is now, in these NT times. We look back to God doing something awesome. It's the consistent witness of the NT: God raised Jesus from the dead.

"... this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."

(Acts 2:23-24)

"And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day ..."

(Acts 10:39-40)

And that life means life - more than just physical life - for us now.

... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

(Romans 10:9)

And yet it's *still* just like we saw back in Psalm 126. We are still stuck in between times.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

(Psalms 126:1)

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!

(Psalms 126:4)

There is still more to come. Some of our songs make it clear, too.

This world is not my home / I'm just a-passing through

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

(2 Corinthians 5:1)

But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

(2 Peter 3:13)

Or as I've seen that second verse paraphrased : ... **where righteousness will be at home.**

So, folks, what am I getting at, this particular day in 2021?

We might be like **Louis Armstrong**, and *think to myself ... what a wonderful world!* And he's largely right. Look at the **sunsets** on the Cornish coast, and it is. Look at the **harvests** in the fields, and it is.

But we were reminded yesterday that 20 years ago **sudden destruction** rained from the skies. And we have found over the last year and a half that life is far from secure as **Coronavirus** came to hold the entire globe in its grip. It's a wonderful world, yes ... but without any ultimate security.

And yet, not 20 years back but nearly 2000, an even more stupendous event happened. God **became man**. God **walked in a human body**. God **died** at the hands of this creation. And then Jesus Christ **rose to life again**. And we are not left to guess at what that was about, and what that was for:

... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ...

(1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

We look back to that and rejoice - even more than we rejoice about being let back into our church buildings and our coffee shops and being allowed to hug our grandchildren again.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

(Psalms 126:1)

But we are not out of the Coronavirus times yet. And we are not yet in a place that we can call fully home. There is more ... *far* more ... that we should hope for.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!

(Psalms 126:4)

And the psalm finishes with a promise that yes, it *will* come about.

***Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.***

(Psalms 126:5-6)

Here it is, one last time, in NT language, all revolving explicitly around Jesus Christ:

***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.***

(1 Peter 1:3-5)

Let me simply that into two words for you. If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ ... if you have turned from your sin to find him as your Saviour ... and now seek to follow him as your Lord ... it's ...

It's coming home