

Sermon on Psalm 137

Hannover International Worship, 19 Feb 2012

Prologue

„Welcome to our homely waters of Babylon!

Welcome to our homely waters of Babylon, migrants bid you a good day. And we welcome you – make yourself comfortable, but not too comfortable, for that matter, for are you here to stay? I don't know, you don't know, we don't know – maybe the *Ausländerbehörde*, the government office for immigration, knows.

We are many, our ‚waters of Babylon‘ are called Havel and Spree. So are we the weeping ones? Who are we?

Our families back home call us ‚heroes‘, at least when we send remittances. The Germans call us *Ausländer*, aliens, illegal, those who rob the German populace of their jobs, fucking nigger – you name it. For those on the politically correct side, we are the *ausländischen* Mitbürger, the fellow citizens with a migration background. But way more often, we are the Nons. We are the Nons-, the Non-Whites, the Non-Europeans, the Non-Germans. We are the ones falling through the cracks, outside the system, out-siders. And the outsider Jesus? I guess he would call us the least of his brethren, and sisters, for that matter.

Had we put up our harps, we would not survive at the waters of Babylon. We need the music, the drums, the shouting, the prayers, the vigils – they are remittances from home. Remittances from Accra, and from the home above.

Who are we? In many ways we are the ones who have crossed the waters of Babylon, already and not yet.

We are *Ausländer*...“

With this poem a 53-year old Ghanaian women who has lived in Germany as an undocumented person for about ten years describes her basic feelings, linking them to Psalm 137 – a psalm that has often been quoted within the faith histories of diaspora communities.

Diaspora communities are emerging from people on the move. The previous as well as the current century has often been referred to as a century of ‚people on the move‘. On a global scale people and peoples have voluntarily or forcibly changed

locations, seeking peace instead of war, survival instead of genocide, food security instead of famine, greener pastures instead of the arid desert, jobs instead of live-threatening unemployment, cultural identities instead of homogenification, dignity instead of gender violence, education instead of illiteracy. People have been and people are on the move, accompanied sometimes by their family members but more often by the faith that used to sustain them.

Movement bears its consequences, socio-political and economic ones but also consequences when it comes to cultural, individual and religious identities ‚Singing to the Lord in a new land‘, as Psalm 137 has it, then becomes a sustaining and reconstructing endeavour, alleviating a sense of alienation and fostering up-lifting religious experience. As places of communal worship, often celebrated within the confines of a group that shares ethnic background, language, a number of cultural traits, history and often also a certain set of experiences, migrant churches are of particular relevance - as ‚home away from home‘ as well as places where identities are re-negotiated and/or reinforced and where integration into the new society can be facilitated.

People on the move, the people of God on the move – these are topics frequently found in biblical scriptures. Already the construction of ‚Urgeschichte‘, Genesis 1-11, is rife with references to experiences of movement and wandering, coupled with its subsequent insecurities and hardships. Paradise lost sees Adam and Eve on their way, and the first murderer mentioned, Cain, is doomed to be on the move, restless and yet protected. The ‚Archparents‘, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had been residents of a country not of their origin, and the sojourning-in-Egypt-motif, coupled with emigration from Egypt as a formative event leads to the creed of the wandering Aramean.

Existence as a stranger as „the primary condition of the people of God“ is spelled out in many ‚passages‘ of the Hebrew Bible, and manifold references are made to a number of major diaspora experiences, often characterized by a double dynamic between punishment and missionary opportunity, alien and home, diaspora and the re-collection of the dispersed that is characteristic for the Hebrew Bible and its variegated passages.

In New Testament writings Jesus is often referred to as stranger, e.g., the one for whom there is no room in the inn, the refugee in Egypt, the internal refugee, with no ‚place to lay his head‘ – and his followers as those ‚being on the way‘ (Acts 9:2). And in the Epistles of Peter diaspora stands for the whole world – members of the

congregation remain ‚aliens‘ and are at the same time chosen people – with alienation being of a theological character. Thus, I guess one can say that diaspora is a *nota ecclesiae*, a mark of the church. The paroikoi, literally from the Greek, the foreigners and aliens, organize themselves in paroikoia, which after the establishment of Christianity as a major religious force, later became the name for organized congregational units.

What does it mean to live as paroikoi, as so-called foreigners and aliens in a strange land, as Psalm 137 has it?

I would like to introduce you to a relecture of Ps 137 done by three men and four women of Ghanaian origin who have been living as undocumented people in either Germany or other Schengen countries for at least ten years. Four of them, Gloria (53 years), Mercy (49 years), John (55 years) and Paul (41 years) are currently working in the restaurant and service industry – Gloria as a cook in a Chinese restaurant, Mercy as a kitchen help in an Indian restaurant, John as a cleaner for a Vietnamese-owned small store and Paul as a driver for a pizza-delivery service. Rebecca (46 years), Purity (41 years) and Michael (40 years) are partly sustained by an extended family network, partly (Rebecca and Purity) securing a small income by sewing clothes and baking cakes on demand. Knowing Gloria since 1994 when both of us were living in South Africa, she had invited me to a Bible study that the seven of them had planned on Psalm 137 for their annual revival meeting in Berlin, November 9, 2011. In their Bible studies, a couple of interpretations emerged concerning Psalm 137. I will concentrate on those aspects that describe how the ‚waters of Babylon‘, how diaspora and diasporic existence, was experienced and interpreted by that group:

1. Diaspora communities as places of in-side-out and in-between:

Diaspora communities often live their lives as outsiders who are not considered part of the in-group or as in-siders who are longing for the outside. In Mercy’s words: „There are days when someone calls you ‚Scheißnegerschlampe‘, bloody nigger bitch, and then you can safely guess that you are not in, you are out of it. And there are other days when I don’t want to be in, where I am just homesick, just longing – for Ghana or for belonging in Germany, I don’t know.“

Religion plays a major role in the identity formation of most human beings. In a migrant setting, religion can also become a cross-border experience in a way described by Gloria, stating: „Literally, I often sat and sit at the riverside of the

Spree and watch the tourist boats passing. I have got a favourite spot, you can hear the bells from three churches ring from there on a Saturday evening. And then I often wonder, who am I? Religion, it is really essential in my life, has ever been, but would I really say that I am first and foremost a Christian? Then why bother about services in Twi, drums and the like and why not simply join one of the many Lutheran churches here who are empty anyway and can do with another member. Or am I first and foremost African? Then why bother about all these prayer vigils for the best of this city, for their redemption, for the Lord to come down and bless and convert this place? I never really liked being in-between something, but I guess that's what I am, Christian and African, African and Christian."

Issues of in-side-out and in-between, of inclusion and exclusion, of group-related membership and the larger body of Christ remain constant challenges. As Paul remarked: „Maybe it sounds stupid, but when I came to Germany, I visited a German Church in Dortmund, Lutheran I think it was. And there were all Whities, everybody spoke German, the whole service was in German, and I felt so totally excluded. For me, that was a Schengen service, not a service for the people of God. I was glad when I could join a Ghanaian congregation. But then, after some time, I looked around, saw only Black people, and all of them Twi-speaking and thought: Have we come up with another Schengen service?"

2. The foreign land as a place of exploitation:

Today's empires more often bear the traits of ‚gated communities‘ rather than of the often quoted global village. While the free flow of goods of all kinds is encouraged, the flow of people is not. John, who has been living inside the Schengen Area for more than fifteen years and whose freedom of movement was severely restricted by the fact that his presence within that area was an undocumented one, reflects on issues of globalization and diaspora formation by comparing Schengen, Babylon and diasporas, commenting:

„Babylonia of old, it's been a major empire, that's for sure. And I guess it's quite likely that the Israelites of old who were deported to that place did not starve there, otherwise they would have returned after they had the chance, all of them. The way I see it, these people, these Israelites, they were *Gastarbeiter*, migrant workers that maybe did not come voluntarily but later decided to stay and maybe also to bring their families along. But then, the waters of Babylon, they were not, how do you say? They were not unique.

There were other empires coming up and going down and all these empires, well, guess what they needed? Labour. And they needed it cheap. And where else to search for cheap labour than outside your own borders? Yes, foreigners, desperate as they often are, they will go for anything, no matter how poor the payment is. And nowadays, Babylon has multiplied, you find it all over the show. And people are sitting and weeping in the sweatshops along the big rivers in all the richer countries of this world. And in order to survive, survive in spirit, they make close communities, and religion, singing, yes, it is important, at least for us, maybe no longer for our kids. So, there are many similar things in modern waters of Babylon. The Babylons throughout the world, they are not welcoming places.“

The longing for ‚Jerusalem‘ then translates into the longing for neighbourly and just relationships, when Michael remarks: „We want to belong, and you can only be at home when people look at you as a neighbour, a human being. We want to feel at home, not in Jerusalem, not in Accra, but right where we are.“

3. Diaspora as the starting ground for mission:

Another notion of diasporic existence that was strongly expressed was the notion of and living as diaspora as a calling by God to a given place. Thus, Michael emphasizes that „most of us, we all heard God’s call to come to Germany and to spread his word in this country. For me, it was a clarion call.“

Mission can take place as a strategic effort utilizing evangelizations, mass media and the like or can be done on a one-on-one-basis. Purity asserts: „We are missionaries; God has sent us as missionaries. See, one morning I was talking to a woman at a bus stop, and she didn’t know anything about Jesus, nothing, isn’t that terrible? We have a task ahead of us!“

And Paul adds: „Often, it sounds easy when we say: God wants us to be his missionaries to Germany, to Europe. But is it far from being easy. Germans can be quite deaf when it comes to God, so you really need to find ways for them to help them understand the message. If you go and tell a German guy ‚Hey, Jesus is your Saviour!‘ he will look at you, shrug his shoulders and say ‚So what‘ oder ‚*Geht’s noch?*‘ And you can’t blame the guy, I mean many of the Germans, they grew up under Communist regimes, no God, no Bible. We need to work hard to translate the Gospel for the German minds and hearts.“

4. **Diaspora communities, communities of resistance**

What does it mean to be communities of resistance? For Gloria, it means to be pointers to God's larger whole. She says: „When we resist, we say that there is more to life than being a White European, yes, the human race is a colourful one. And vice versa, there is more to life than being a Non-European, also that. I think what diasporas do is that they show you the larger picture, show you how colourful God's creation is. A bit of God's people at large in a small spot of this world.“

For John resistance means to unite towards justice, towards the inclusive kingdom of God: „If we are together, we can resist and say that, no ways, we are not going to be exploited as cheap labour, we are not going to end up in sweatshops, we are not bowing to all the empires in this world because the Kingdom of God is much larger.“

The people of God are people essentially on the move, the church a migrant church. The ‚rivers of Babylon‘ remain a water-shed to globalizing solidarity and the alternative Kingdom of God, in all its plurality and in all its catholicity. Psalm 137 in its various histories of interpretation calls, from a Christian perspective, for a rediscovery of the paroikia, the being-a-foreigner in an ecumenical perspective, with oikoumene being the whole inhabited earth.

Diaspora is the very congregational being that has been highlighted in a number of New Testament scriptures, a being that is characterized by openness and border-crossing.

Let me conclude with a poem by Gloria that she has entitled ‚I am a border liner‘:

„I am a border-liner.

I am a border-liner, that's what I am – am mother and daughter, Christian and African, African and German, hopeful and despaired, wanderer and wonderer, someone who is excluded and someone who excludes.

I am a border-liner.

I am a border-liner when I walk the tightrope of changing identities, always afraid that I might fall down beyond rescue, losing presence, losing past. Can you see me dance? I dare to dance because Sarah was laughing, because Abraham just got going,

Ruth was on her way, Joseph on the move, the people of God in the wilderness and because Jesus did just for us what he did.

I am a border-liner.

I am a border-liner in my desire to cross-over and to preserve at the same time, loving my little cultural niche and loving the colourful people of God from all walks and ends of life. You never know what border-liners will do next. You want to know what I would do? Blast all the bloody frontiers away so that people can walk freely, associate freely, seek for survival, refuge, support, freely and with dignity. Yes, I am a border-liner who wants to see the gates of the Schengen fortress wide open.

I am a border-liner.

I am a border-liner. And who are you?"

Amen

Psalm 137

- ¹ By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
- ³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- ⁴ How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?
- ⁵ If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
- ⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.
- ⁷ Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
"Tear it down," they cried,
"tear it down to its foundations!"
- ⁸ Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
- ⁹ Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.