

Friday March 12

Psalm 126 – anticipating the ‘new normal’

- 1 When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.
- 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”
- 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.
- 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.
- 6 He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

I’ve been looking on the internet at some graphs which plot the ups and downs of the past twelve months of the pandemic in the UK. One showed the R-number (the reproduction rate for the virus as it jumped from one person to another). Another plotted the numbers of new infections, while a third graph plotted the numbers of daily reported deaths. One feature that’s immediately obvious on each of these graphs is all the ups and downs. These coincided, of course, with the ups and downs of our own experience. The downs were the times when we were locked down, with infections, hospital admissions and deaths rising; the ups were when the figures were at low levels, when we could meet up with family and friends, go out for a coffee – or even a slap-up meal. Some people even got away for holidays!

There was another slightly different kind of up-and-down. There have been days when the news has been relatively hopeful: the day when initial vaccine trials turned in exciting results, the day later on when one of the new vaccines was passed for use in the population and the days when we talked about the lifting of restrictions in time for the coming summer. And then there were the other days – the down days. There was a particularly bad one early in February when the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland announced that some restrictions would need to stay in place until 2022. What did this mean, we all wondered: another 12 months of lockdown – another year of *this*? The morning radio news the next day was infested with deep gloom; the poor presenters were struck down with it as much as all their poor listeners.

That up-and-down experience is reflected in Psalm 126. It starts with joy: *“When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”*

Then it descends into despair: *“Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.”*

It finishes by saying: yes, things are really tough at the moment, but the day will come when we’re full of joy and THANKSGIVING again:

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

That’s picture language for us, but it would have meant a lot to an agricultural community. What would we carry with us, I wonder, on that day when all is back to some sort of normality and we want to give thanks?