

Responsorial Psalm, 5th Sunday, Lent C

[Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6](#)

(3) **The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with rejoicing.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad indeed.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the torrents in the southern desert.

Those that sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Although they go forth weeping,
carrying the seed to be sown,

They shall come back rejoicing,
carrying their sheaves.

The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

142 Ps 126. A lament of the community. Structure: 1-3, an historical survey; 4-6, a prayer for restoration. This liturgical song can be understood as a prayer during the first years of the return from Babylon (cf. Hag, Zech), although the request in 4 remains vague. **1-3.** The reference is to the end of the Exile. The return could hardly be believed (“like men dreaming”) at first. And then both the “nations” and Israel acknowledged the *magnalia Dei*. Some scholars (Gunkel) interpret 1-3 as an announcement of future deliverance. **4.** This request indicates that the return was not all that it had been envisioned to be. In the poet’s own time, Yahweh’s continuing intervention is needed. The comparison to the wadies in the Negeb (“torrents”) bears on the transformation undergone by the dry, caked valley, once water courses through it. **5-6.** A consoling, proverblike saying (perhaps uttered by a priest?). The mourning associated with sowing may hark back to the symbolism of the death of the fertility god (Baal, Osiris), although this background has nothing to do with the meaning here.

Haydock's Catholic Commentary

The people of God rejoice at their delivery from captivity.

Ver. 1. *Sion.* It cannot be doubted but this regards the captives of Babylon: but still David might compose it, as he was a prophet; and herein the redemption of mankind may also be described. (Berthier) --- The captives pray for the return of the rest of their brethren. (Calmet) --- *Comforted.* Hebrew, "dreaming." (Calmet) --- They could hardly believe their own eyes, like St. Peter, Acts xii. 9. This extraordinary joy is felt by devout souls, when freed from sin. (Worthington) --- The Greek cities which the Romans declared free, could scarcely believe that they had understood the herald. *Majus gaudium fuit, &c.* (Livy xxxiii.) --- Thus were the Jews affected. (Calmet) (Psalm xiii. 2.) --- Chaldean, "we were like convalescents," which comes nearer to the sense of the Septuagint. (Berthier)

Ver. 2. *Shall.* Or "did;" (Calmet) though the future is here well employed. (Berthier) --- The prophet uses both tenses, shewing the certainty of the event. (Worthington) --- It would require some time before the Gentiles would become sufficiently acquainted with the concerns of the Jews. (Berthier) --- As soon as they did, they expressed their admiration, while the former were careful not to imitate the conduct of those who murmured at leaving Egypt. (St. Chrysostom)

Ver. 4. *South.* As the Egyptians hope for the overflowing of the Nile; (Hammond) or as the south wind melts the snow, so as to make the Jordan overflow its banks. (Theodoret) --- The return of our brethren will be as agreeable to us as water to a thirsty soil. (Chaldean) (Muis) --- make them come quickly, and in great numbers, Isaias lx. 3., and lxvi. 12. (Calmet) --- Esdras brought back some, and Nehemias others, from Babylon. (Berthier) --- The ten tribes returned from Assyria later, and by degrees, (Calmet, Diss.) if at all. Those who arrived first at Jerusalem pray for the rest. (Berthier) --- The prophet foreseeing this event, desireth its perfect and speedy accomplishment, (Worthington) though it were scarcely to be expected, no more than (Haydock) a copious torrent in the south. (Worthington)

Ver. 5. *Joy.* This was the case of the martyrs, &c., (Luke vi. 21., and John xvi. 20.) as well as of the captives, Jeremias xxxi. 9., Isaias lxvi. 10., and Baruch v. 6. (Calmet) --- Tribulation commonly attends the virtuous in this life. Their reward is reserved for the next. (St. Augustine) (Worthington) --- Sowing, we know not whether we shall ever reap. (Haydock) --- This is a sort of proverb, which is applied to the captives. (Berthier)

Ver. 6. *They.* Hebrew, "he," which must be taken distributively for all. (Berthier)

Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 26. (non-Catholic)

Heading (126:1a). See the *Comment* on 120:1. As in the case of the previous psalm, the opening reference to Zion encouraged incorporation into the present collection.

The restoration already inaugurated (126:1ab–3). God’s people meditate in tones of praise on Yahweh’s earlier activity on behalf of the community. They look back to a turning point in their fortunes, the reestablishment of the worship of the believing community in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. It was a dream come true; it marked a sharp reversal of the harsh reality of their former distress. In the court of the sanctuary they recall their reaction of joyful excitement and record the Gentiles’ reactions of awe, whereby even they were forced to admit that Israel’s God must be the author of such a transformation. The recipients hasten to add their own praise in confirmation. Their experience was of a piece with Yahweh’s miraculous acts of salvation in their earlier history; it rightly called forth a response of glad testimony.

Beyerlin (*We Are like Dreamers*, 10–23) has urged caution in interpreting the dreaming in v 1, lest an alien, anachronistic meaning be read into it. He himself understands the text as a dreamlike anticipation of Yahweh’s future restoration of Zion, expressed from an exilic standpoint. In OT thought, dreams can reveal the divinely determined future, and so the speakers describe themselves as כחלמים, “like dreamers,” in the sense that they look forward to it and are certain that it will come. Beyerlin also regards כחלמים as an allusion to Joel 3:1 (2:28) (see *Form/Structure/Setting*). However, A. M. Harman (RTR 44 [1985] 77; cf. Mosis, “Mit Jauchzen,” 189) has drawn attention to the factor of comparison: the phrase כחלמים “expresses a state of mind comparable to dreaming in sleep, but not of actual sleep with an accompanying dream.” More probably the reference to dreaming is to be elucidated by reference to Isa 29:7–8 (כחלום, “like a dream”), where a hungry or thirsty person dreams of eating or drinking. It is true that there the dreamlike experience is characterized as unreal and doomed to frustration, but that is only because it is stressed that the dreamer awakes. In the dream itself the need is felt to be met, and it is not until awaking that the dreamer realizes otherwise. Waking is here irrelevant to the simile, which describes the welcome reversal of a situation of need.

For הגדיל לעשות, “do a great work,” in vv 2–3, one may compare Joel 2:21 and also הגדיל, “do greatly,” in 1 Sam 12:24 and עשה גדלות, “do great things,” of Yahweh in Deut 10:21; Pss 71:19; 106:21. The event is implicitly compared with God’s great saving deeds in the past.

The requirement for the present to catch up with the past (126:4–6). The self-reminder of earlier divine intervention has served as an encouragement to believe that Yahweh would again intervene so signally. God has the power to bless the covenant people in their land. The retrospect has functioned too as a virtual challenge to their God, in whose presence they have met, to resolve the tension between past and present realities. The psalm moves to an explicit appeal in v 4. The cycle of misfortune and deliverance celebrated in v 1 has half come round

again. The community brings its prayer for restoration with the hope that Yahweh's saving activity will be repeated (cf. Ps 106:43–44; Judg 3:9, 15). That the Lord of history has such power is attested by the parallel work of God as Lord of nature. Even the summer drought of the Negev is followed by the welcome winter floods through the wadis. So Yahweh can intervene again in salvation, and a plea is brought for this to happen. Their parched lives need renewing. A time of great divine work has given way to a period of "small things" (Zech 4:10); frustration and difficulty dog the steps of the postexilic community. Yet with confident tones they affirm their faith that Yahweh's work of transformation will be repeated and brought to completion. Reassurance is found in the fact that harvest follows seedtime in the divinely regulated calendar of the year (Gen 8:22). A proverb is used to express the people's present plight and hope of renewed life. Traditionally, sowing had overtones of sorrow as a sign of death (cf. John 12:24; 1 Cor 15:36). However, the toil and tears of frustration would, eventually, give way to a harvest of blessing for the community (cf. Ps 30:6 [5]).

In summer, in the arid south especially, the wadi beds were dry, as Joel 1:20 attests, until the winter rains filled them. It is with this latter phenomenon that comparison is made in v 4. "Most of these floods swept into the Mediterranean and were useless in antiquity; however, along these river beds are located most of the springs and wells of the Negeb which were essential for permanent habitation" (Y. Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 24; cf. N. Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, 92–94). With the evident proverb in v 5 one can compare Job 4:8; Prov 22:8a; Hos 8:7; John 12:24. Behind it lies mythological antecedents of the burial and revival of the fertility god, which may be illustrated from Egyptian and Ugaritic texts, but "the poet had long ago lost any memory that this antithesis was rooted in the ancient Canaanite cult drama" (F. F. Hvidberg, *Weeping and Laughing*, 132; cf. Weiser, 762).

Explanation

The believing community is sustained with the resource of prayer and with assurances of God's past salvation and inherent faithfulness. Present distress is no argument for the denial of Yahweh's power or grace (cf. Ps 77:8–11 [7–10]). After reversing a calamitous past, God could be relied upon to reverse a painful present, by sending rain of blessing, as it were, and crowning their metaphorical work of sowing with a welcome harvest. Hope lends wings to their prayer, and both are grounded in Yahweh's historical self-revelation as faithful to the covenant people. In similar vein the early church was urged to look away from suffering to glory, with a conviction that the God who had begun a good work would faithfully bring it to completion (2 Cor 4:17, 18; Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 5:24). "You will have sorrow now," promised Jesus in John 16:22, "but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take away from you your joy" (author's translation).

Daily Bible Study Series, Psalms, Volume 2, (non-Catholic)

A Song of Ascents.

¹When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

³The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb!

⁵May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy!

⁶He that goes forth weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

We today hold memorial services on anniversaries of important occasions. Here the believing community are remembering with joy and gratitude that God, in the year 538 B.C. (the year when King Cyrus conquered Babylon and set the exiles free) had, through Cyrus' victory, *restored the fortunes of Zion*, or, perhaps better, “rehabilitated” his people. This event was by now a number of years back.

But not too long ago for them to recall the delirious joy they had experienced then. It had all been such a miracle. Who, even a week before the event, could have expected that the mighty Babylonian Empire would collapse overnight, or that Cyrus the Persian could have captured its capital city “without firing a shot”, as actually happened. (In the same way, why could God not save his world from the threat of nuclear war “without firing a shot”?) So it had all been like a

dream; we simply shouted for joy. And then that infectious phrase the world has never forgotten: *our mouth was filled with laughter*. We should realize that very few people could still have been living who had seen Jerusalem in its former glory, for fifty years and more had passed. But then Jerusalem was more than a city—it was an idea, it was a promise, it was the symbol of a Presence. Accordingly, the younger generation of the exiles even in far away Babylonia, had been instructed in all the way that God had led his people from the days of Abraham right till the coming of Cyrus, thus fulfilling the command of God himself in Deut. 6:7; 11:19. That is why we today lay the duty of education in the faith upon parents at the time when they present their child for baptism.

The heathen noticed! Perhaps not in reality, of course. But the Israelites were sure they must have seen what God had done; and here they even put the words of praise to Israel's God into their mouths! This belief is on a par with Second-Isaiah's belief that pagan King Cyrus could be hailed as God's Messiah, though he did not realize it (Isa. 45:4). The point is that the prophecies of that great theologian had now actually been fulfilled before their very eyes, and they had in reality arrived back home to their beloved city of Jerusalem. It is a pity that the RSV has missed the point when it translates what the heathen are saying by, *The Lord has done great things for them*, when the Hebrew has, not "for" them, but "along with" them. As we saw in Psalm 124, God had been *with* his people when they were swallowed up by the monster of Babylon. It was from within that situation that God had set his people free. One whole line of verse records their joy, in the simple phrase, *We are glad!*

At verse 4 we reach the anniversary service, so to speak. God's people are still in trouble. They are still trying to rebuild their lives in the ruins of the ancient city. So on this anniversary of the events of 538 B.C. we hear them cry: "O Lord, lead back our captive ones". It is clear that not by any means all Israelites had returned from Babylon. Those referred to had probably lost the vision; they had prospered financially in that big city, and now preferred it to sharing the joy of reconstruction with those who were "roughing it" in Zion.

Our group here prays for prosperity to happen yet. There had evidently been some disastrous set-back in their community life. Perhaps they needed rain, as we learn from Haggai 1:11 was the case around 520 B.C. Perhaps they now hoped to welcome "home" some stragglers who had changed their minds in Babylon, and were now wending their way to Jerusalem. But whatever the situation was, the psalmist is insisting that God is the God who brings good out of evil, so that the good becomes doubly good after all. God is the God of hope, for the whole future lies in his hands, and at any time he can resurrect what is past and can give renewal and new life to his faithful people (cf. John 12:24–25; 16:20; 1 Cor. 15:36–38).

We can put the thesis of this psalm into one sentence that speaks home to us today: "The Lord has done great things *with me*; I am glad." And we can recall that at the very end of the Bible we have the reassuring cry: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).