Probably most of us here remember Boney M? I’m not going to ask you to confess if you ever bought one of their records! But amazingly, Boney M are the 33rd best selling pop acts of all time in the UK and their best selling single was, of ‘By the Rivers of Babylon’. It was a good song for its time, based on Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, there we wept when we remembered Zion…How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

Well, everyone knows how it goes. But perhaps not surprisingly, when they wrote the lyrics, they missed out the last two verses of this Psalm: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” It’s not a catchy line for a pop song, really…

In fact, verses like that in the Bible are a bit embarrassing, really, because here we are, trying to be disciples of God, all peaceful and loving and forgiving and then you get a verse like this that actually encourages us to take up the babies of those we hate and smash them against rocks until their heads are pulp and there is no more life left in them. What on earth are we going to do with ideas like that in the Bible?

Well, we could ignore it – pretend it doesn’t exist - and just focus on the warm cuddly bits in the Bible. But that’s not a very honest approach because we know in 2 Timothy it says, “All Scripture is inspired by God…” It doesn’t say, “All those bits of Scripture that are nice and easy to understand are inspired by God”, it says, “All Scripture…” So if even these verses are inspired, we’d better get our heads around them and see what they have to say to us.

But actually, the more I reflect on this Psalm, the more helpful I find it. Because it has a great deal to tell us about how to pray to God when we are angry. We all get angry. But sometimes in life we feel consumed by anger; anger becomes the dominant emotion we feel. Everything we do, everything we think is focussed through our anger, perhaps as a result of being desperately hurt by someone; a broken friendship or divorce or as a result of an experience of loss, grief or bereavement. For some, there is residual anger from an experience of abuse or addiction or poor childhood. In many ways, for many reasons, our lives can become disfigured through deep, deep anger; an anger that won’t let us go.

And since we can’t just wish our anger away, how do we pray about it?

Many people don’t pray about it, of course. Some people cope with anger by putting it in a box or putting it to the back of their mind. They carry on their everyday lives, their jobs, their marriage, their relationships as if nothing were wrong at all. And that self-delusion can carry over into their relationship with God and the Church. Sunday after Sunday they come to church, smiling, chatting, singing the hymns and praying the prayers as if nothing were wrong - but underneath the mask, there is a raging anger. Someone is hated, a circumstance is despised. Or maybe God is despised for not being different or not having made life a bit different. The anger boils away and our lives are destroyed just in trying to keep it hidden; because it’s always there, waiting to rise to the surface, waiting to boil over.

When you are angry with others, angry at life, angry with God - how do you pray?

Psalm 137 can help us – I am sure of that. If you want to follow it with me, it’s on page 605 in the first half of the Pew Bibles, the Old Testament.

First, a bit of historical context.

The Israelites had been living peaceably in Israel for many years when the Babylonians attacked them. The Babylonians were the biggest, most powerful nation in the world and they attacked and defeated the Israelites and took them captive back to Babylon, which is now Iraq. Almost the entire nation was carried off into captivity, hundreds of miles from home. They had to leave their homes, their possessions, their businesses, their Temple; everything they counted as dear to them was ripped out of their lives. And this Psalm was written when they were in Babylon. They had been there for nearly seventy years – and they were angry; they were dispossessed, broken and homeless.

And so, as the first verse of this Psalm says, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down; and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” Don’t be fooled by the quiet imagery of this verse because even in these words, there is a great expression of pain. The Israelites had been used to living in a country of rugged terrain with hills and rivers and streams meandering across the landscape. But Babylon was all neatly ordered around man-made canals. Even the geography of Babylon, as beautiful as it was, was a reminder of what they had lost and increased their pain and loneliness.

Then verse 2: “On the willows there we hung up our harps.” Again, such a powerful image here

because the Israelites had always been a people of song; they had always used their instruments and voices to praise God. That was their tradition, their heritage. But now, in their pain and desolation, the harps are hung up on the willow trees; no noise, no playing, no songs of rejoicing. They had nothing to sing about.

And perhaps some of us here today want to hang our harps up because we feel that we have nothing to sing about, either. But even worse for the Israelites, their suffering silence was mocked by the Babylonians, which added insult to injury, verse 3: “For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” And so we can understand their words in verse 4: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” How can we possibly praise God in this situation? Why should we let our faith be a sport for those who don’t care?

Because the truth is that, even in the midst of all their pain and desolation, even in the midst of their ever-increasing sense of anger, the Israelites had not lost the faith. The reason they wouldn’t sing wasn’t because they no longer trusted God, it wasn’t because they no longer believed, but because their faith was so precious to them, they wouldn’t just go through the motions. They wouldn’t sing and smile just to keep others happy, or just because they were expected to.

And when we feel angry inside, neither should we…Because trust in God is too personal for that, as verse 5 & 6 show us: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!” Is it any wonder that, after years of loss and pain and abuse, an anger was welling up deep inside of them to the point that they were feeling overwhelmed?

And what was their prayer? Verse 7: “Remember, Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to the foundations!” A call for vengeance to fall on these people.

And then, most savage of all, verses 8 & 9: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

We need to be honest about this and recognise that this is not a godly attitude. It is not good and pious – it is sinful. It is unjustifiable to want such harm to be brought on innocent children. But there is something for us to learn about prayer through these wishes of the Israelites.

And perhaps the first thing to say is that true prayer is born out of passion. It’s a sad truth that the church today and Christians today do not often share a passion for prayer. I am ashamed of this myself…that I watch the news each night and I see migrants dying in the Mediterranean, I see refugees fleeing from Middle Eastern conflict, I watch the news and see the bodies of Syrian children massacred - and I don’t cry. Yes, I think it’s awful just like everyone else and I remember to pray a little for them each day and pray for a resolution to their problems - but I don’t engage with the reality of their situations with passion: I don’t see those images like God sees them.

If I did, I would be tearing my hair out with anger, I would be shouting for something to be done about it. I would be spending hours on my knees in prayer every day. And if I had some of that spiritual passion burning within me, maybe I would be praying like the Israelites. Perhaps I too would be asking for vengeance on Assad and his family. Perhaps I too would be wanting the soldiers who commit such terrible crimes to suffer and have their children suffer in the same way they have inflicted on others.

And I wonder which is the greatest sin? Is it the sin of the Syrian mother who wishes for something unspeakable to happen to the children of her enemies? Or is it my sin that causes me to watch the news, yawn and switch over to watch Frasier on Comedy Central?

Which is the greatest sin? The sin of wanting revenge in the face of mistreatment, or the sin of apathy, of not caring enough to get off the sofa and do something about it? Jesus says in Revelation 3: “I know what you have done; I know you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I am going to spit you out of my mouth!” It is not the Syrian mother who will be spat out of Jesus’ mouth as a result of her passionate prayer born out of the heat of the moment. But as for me, I’d better watch out, because my lukewarm attitude will receive condemnation from a passionate God.

God wants us to be passionate when we pray, even when that passion leads us to say things in prayer that we ought not to say.

And that’s the second lesson that we learn from this prayer of the Israelites - that when we pray and show God the full force of our anger, it’s actually OK to do that!

It doesn’t matter what you say to God - he is big enough and strong enough to cope with it. If you are having a rough time in your life right now. If you are feeling angry at God for your circumstances – tell him! Don’t just tell him – shout at him; rant and rave and swear at God if you want to: it’s OK, because he’s big enough to handle that. It might be sinful, it might be the wrong way to approach him - but it is far better to do that than to keep your anger bottled up inside and approach God like a hypocrite, using all the right words in prayer but approaching him with a hateful heart. God is not interested in our words; he loves each one of us so much that he wants us to share what is in our hearts with him.

If we do that, we’re not going to catch God out: there’s no surprises for him. Just a couple of Psalms on, we read this at the beginning of Psalm 139: “Lord, you have examined me and know me. You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts. You see me, whether I am working or resting; you know all my actions. Even before I speak, you already know what I will say. You are all round me on every side; you protect me with your power. Your knowledge of me is too deep; it is beyond my understanding.” We cannot take God by surprise – he knows what we are thinking, what is in our hearts So isn’t it better to be straight and up front with God? Isn’t it better to get our hurt and bitterness and anger all out into the open?

If we try to ignore our pain, we can do stuff that will gain us temporary relief through overworking, or drinking or absorbing ourselves with over-busyness. But the reality is we need to face up to our anger, give it to God and let him deal with it. There’s a beautiful truth about prayer, which is this: we can take risks when we pray, we can say things that might be inappropriate, we can try new approaches to God. What’s the worst that can happen? If I pray an inappropriate prayer, or get the language wrong, or get my motivation wrong, I’m not going to get struck down by lightning, I’m not going to be thrown into the pit of hell for all eternity. Let’s learn a lesson from the Israelites in this Psalm, let’s take a few risks in prayer and maybe say some stuff that we know isn’t too godly - but at least it’s honest and tells God what’s really in our hearts.

In closing, let me tell you how the story ends because there’s nothing worse than not knowing the ending, is there? Well, the Babylonians were destroyed by the Persians and about 10 years after this Psalm was written, the Israelites were allowed home and they rebuilt their homes and their Temple and became prosperous once again. But the Israelites went back quite peaceably. They never did smash any babies against the rocks. It seems they had vented their anger in their prayers, not their deeds, which is a far healthier way of going about things.

But what is important to grasp, of course, is that it was God who overthrew the Babylonians: he wasn’t absent from the Israelites’ situation. He cared passionately about their anger and their suffering. God heard their prayers and he answered them.

And that’s the truth for us all, that we can be confident God hears our prayers and our anger and he will answer our prayers according to his will. Our God is a God of love who hates to see us suffer and he will do everything necessary to strengthen us through the tough times. All he asks is that we are honest with him; open with him about how we feel.

I don’t think it’s any co-incidence that, in the plans of God, Psalm 137 is followed by 138, the first three verses of which say this: “I thank you, Lord, with all my heart; I sing praise to you before the gods. I face your holy Temple, bow down, and praise your name because of your constant love and faithfulness, because you have shown that your name and your commands are supreme. You answered me when I called to you; with your strength you strengthened me.”

For many of us, it can be a long, slow journey from the anger and bitterness of Psalm 137 to the peace of mind and worship of Psalm 138. But it’s a journey each one of us is called to make; not in our own strength but the strength of God.

Maybe today is the day to begin that journey; to express your anger, to let go of your anger, and then you will be on a journey towards joining in with the last verse of Psalm 138 and say to God: “You will do everything you have promised. Lord, your love is eternal. Complete the work that you have begun.”