

Harps and willows

It seems ages since my last devotions for the band but here are some thoughts that have been on my mind over the past few weeks. During this period, as I think I've mentioned before, I have listened each week to Marc Harry's Salvation meetings on Fortress Radio. In addition to their regular services they have also carried a series on the music of the International Staff Band, initially looking at the history of the band, followed by a number focussing on Christmas music.

Coming to the Army in the early 1970s, my first experience of a Staff Bandmaster was the somewhat formidable figure of Bernard Adams, resplendent in his stand-collar uniform. I never played under his baton, but I was privileged to sing in the South London Festival Chorus with him as conductor, discovering a very different side to him, not least his waspish sense of humour. Part of that experience was a recording later issued under the title of Festival Salute, including both the chorus and the ISB.

One of the items we sang was 'Why hang your harp on the willow' by Bramwell Coles. This was my first encounter with that particular song which has since become one of my favourites, later singing it under Vic Handscombe at Cambridge Heath. The text comes straight from scripture, at a time when the people of Israel had been carried off in captivity to Babylon:

Psalm 137

1 By the rivers 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.

In the song, the Israelites are taken to task for setting their harps to one side during their exile, this being symbolic of their failure to give God due consideration. They may have been taken out of their

comfort zone, losing the temple in Jerusalem and other aspects of their worship routine, but that was no reason to forget God and what He had done for them. I've been thinking of this whilst we have been unable to play our instruments to the glory of God, and playing in Sloane Square the other week was very much like taking my harp down from the willow. We now face even more restrictions, with little sign of relief in the near future, but I trust and pray that our devotion to God will not evaporate but will grow in the face of adversity.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UucxFq_tY0g