

# Along the track

## Wattle and Gum

*Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem. Ps 137:1*

When the Jewish people were taken into exile in Babylon, they mourned for their country and its ways. It was a deeply sad time for them. Some of the most beautiful prayers and psalms were written during this exile. Sometimes it was the small things that reminded them of home, of their life lost – a bush, a tree, a familiar song. Their captors taunted them: ‘sing us your songs of joy’, but they hung up their harps in the poplar trees and were silent.

Sometimes when you travel overseas, homesickness can emerge, even if only briefly. We live in a beautiful country. It is easy to miss the familiar countryside, the easy way of life that most of us take for granted. In Israel, it was a surprise to see rows and rows of gum trees along the Jordan River. It looked like Echuca. They were a gift from the people of Australia to the newly formed nation of Israel back in the forties. There are thousands of gum trees along the final stages of the Camino in Spain. The first thing to greet you was the familiar smell of eucalyptus. They are not always welcome guests in that country as the eucalypts have turned the soil alkaline. But for the Australian pilgrims, they were a welcome sight, a reminder of the things of home.

In the cold, snowy mountains of Italy in deep winter, flashes of bright yellow catch the eye. The floral emblem of Australia, the wattles are a welcome sight when other trees are bare and the countryside covered in snow. In some towns, large bunches of wattle (called mimosa in Italy) are given as gifts, and some streets are festooned with great bunches of this yellow burst of sunshine.

There are a thousand or so varieties of wattle in Australia. They seem to grow anywhere across this vast continent, from the deserts to the tropics, salt country to fertile coasts. Botanists tell us that these hardy trees can be traced back 23 million years.

Wattles are very resilient. So are gum trees. Wattles are resilient because of their hard seeds. That’s why they are often the first things to regrow after bushfires. They are great symbols of hope at these times, as are the leaves that begin

to appear on the blackened gums some months or weeks after the fire has done its worst. They remind us to ask ourselves, what signs of hope do we see in our own lives, the lives of our family, our community, our country, our church? Without hope, life and work have little meaning. Life without hope can feel very empty. We would not strive for much if we did not carry hope in our hearts. There are times when we need to go looking for these signs because we can become ‘snowed under’ or events can make us anxious or perhaps depressed. Looking for genuine signs of hope can bring new life, new energy. God is never far away. God never abandons us. Those experiencing exile in Babylon felt so at times, but eventually they discovered that God was close by, all that time.

Sometimes it takes a bit of homesickness to help us appreciate the gifts we have. It is easy to take things for granted, especially things we see or experience every day. Homesickness can help us to realise that life is precious wherever we find ourselves. Homesickness reminds us that family too is precious and not to be taken for granted. It reminds us to ask ourselves how and when do we show our appreciation of each family member? Sometimes it is rewarding to just look around at where we are, what we can see and hear and experience. I came from a farm in a beautiful part of Victoria. I often watched my father leaning on a fence just looking over the countryside. He never tired of the variety of experiences it offered every season, every day. He was close to nature and close to God.

Homesickness is also a reminder that there are those in our midst who also miss the things of home, but they cannot go back, they cannot experience the familiar sights and experiences of their Old Country, the culture, the joys, the sounds, the people – all the things that have nurtured them. For them, sitting by the waters of Babylon and weeping takes on an added meaning. In a place like Australia, we are called on to ask ‘how we can help?’

Regards  
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