

20th Sunday after Pentecost (Melbourne Marathon): CCSY, 10 October 2010
Jer 29:1, 4-7; Ps 66; 2 Tim 2:8-15; Lk 17:11-19

Well, congratulations on getting here this morning [with all the road closures], and, speaking of marathons, especially to those present who have been participating in synod this week, where there was no avoiding wrangling over words! Mind you, St Paul didn't seem to mind the occasional verbal wrangle! It was encouraging to see a solid Cathedral pew-full of clergy and laity from this Parish, and I thank them for their ministry on our behalf and commend them on their endurance. I was only able to manage a 'half-marathon' at synod, but we were well served by our relatively youthful contingent, and I would pay particular tribute to Dr Peter Sherlock for his contribution, without which I suspect a good deal more wrangling might have occurred.

A few weeks ago I described the prophet Jeremiah as a 'glass half empty' kind of guy: not really known for his optimistic outlook. Today we find him in a somewhat more sanguine frame of mind, as he urges those exiled from Jerusalem in Babylon not to be anxious about returning to their homeland, but rather to be prepared to settle down for several generations at least: build houses, plant veggie gardens, raise households; above all, seek the welfare of this city in which you are aliens, and pray for it, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah's was one response to the real politic of his day: one take on how the tiny province of Judah might relate to the Babylonian superpower. There were other views around amongst the religious leaders of Jerusalem, including that of Jeremiah's peer, Hananiah, who in the previous chapter to the one we heard from this morning promotes a much more adversarial relationship with Babylon, by siding with its great rival, Egypt.

Israel's experience of invasion, captivity, and exile generated a whole raft of theological reflections – in fact they comprise much of the Hebrew Bible, each an attempt to interpret this crisis – to discern God's presence or absence in it – and to respond accordingly.

Palestinian-American writer Edward Said, has described exile as

The unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home . . . And while it is true [he says] that literature and history contain heroic, romantic . . . even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.¹

No wonder that the lepers in today's gospel reading who are suddenly emancipated from the social captivity imposed by their condition don't have the presence of mind to return to thank their liberator, except for the Samaritan, whose life as both 'foreigner' and 'leper' is doubly exilic, and whose abiding estrangement draws him back to the source of healing.

Exile, in whatever form, is bitter. Peter Sherlock reflected with us last week on the psalmist's lament: 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion . . . How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Ps 137:1, 4)

¹ *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.

And yet that is precisely what the prophet Jeremiah is asking the exiles to do: to sing the songs of Zion in Babylon; to offer worship and make supplication from the midst of that experience – out of that wound – of displacement.

Anglican priest and sociologist, Gary Bouma, speaking at the Melbourne College of Divinity's Centenary Conference on the future of religion in July, pointed to research suggesting that within a decade fewer than 50% of Australians will identify themselves as Christian, even in a nominal sense.

That's no great surprise, given we live in a post-Christendom, if not quite yet a post-Christian, era. But how will Western churches, especially, interpret and respond to this experience of being 'exiled' from the centre of their culture to its edges – of being, increasingly, a minority voice, a marginal community? Along the lines advocated by Jeremiah in our first reading: seeking the welfare of the city in which we're set? Or in the less accommodating spirit of Jeremiah's rival, Hananiah?

I think synod showed us that both of these instincts are very much in play for us. Some of the motions debated resonated with wider community concerns relating to the environment, indigeneity, professional standards, best educational practice, strategic vision and planning, mental health, disability, and – significantly – freedom of religion. Others, however, and I'm thinking of those addressing complex questions such as euthanasia, sexuality, and abortion, seemed to be pushing back with respect to the secular context of our ministry and mission, as though expecting the world in which we find ourselves to march to the beat of our drum.

There are times, of course, when singing the songs of Zion means taking a prophetic stand after the pattern of Hananiah: denouncing those things which diminish life, or deny dignity, or which threaten the integrity of creation. As, historically at least, a church-in-society tradition, however, my sense is that the prophetic witness of Anglicanism more often looks more like Jeremiah's tips for how to live faithfully and well in exile.

One might attribute this to the high value Anglicans place on the doctrine of the Incarnation: the mystery of God's eternal Word being exiled in our flesh, and born in a particular time and place, under the formative influence of powerful cultural and geopolitical forces, including religion. True, as Paul reminds Timothy, the word of God is not chained; and yet the capital 'W' Word of God that is God's Christ is bound to history, and to human frailty, and bound forever to the disaster-prone city of Jerusalem by virtue of the Incarnation. In Jesus of Nazareth God 'digs in', as it were, to creation: puts down roots with us – becomes invested, quite literally, in our welfare – working for the same within the constraints and ambiguities of our flesh.

Why? Because God so loves the world. Not the church sent to and set in that world, but the world out there: all of the people running a marathon today, or lobbying for euthanasia, or legislating for abortion, or whatever else we may approve of, or not, on the basis of our belief structure; people who, once we've lived alongside them for a bit, might invite us to sing one of the songs of Zion. And what will be our response then?

It's easy to rail at the things – or people – that alienate us and prevent us from feeling fully ourselves in our communities, or fully at home in the world. Much harder to dig in and work patiently for the welfare of a city we might not have chosen to construct quite as we find it, but in whose welfare our own is invested, not to mention the love of God.

To the extent we are able to do this, we do it as those whose vocation, in a sense, is to exile: who have no abiding city, but who look and wait and long and work for what Jesus called the Kingdom of God to take deeper root in our world and to graciously accommodate us, for the hope of which we return again and again to the throne of grace, singing *Laus Deo*.

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