

God with God's people in Exile

Jeremiah 29: 1-14

I wonder whether you can remember where you were on 9/11, as those planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre? Seismic events like this scar our memories. As do some moments that are particular to us? A moment after which you know nothing will ever be the same... Perhaps it's the death of a loved one... breakdown of a friendship... terrible illness... loss of a job and identity...

For God's ancient people, the exile is one such seismic event – simply that it's referred to with the definitive article... *the* Exile... tells you enough!

Current superpower, the Babylonians, have captured the capital city of Judah, Jerusalem. Now, they follow their standard operating procedure: they get any possible opposition out of the way by sending them into exile. Notice who they've picked: the top brass - elders, priests, prophets... court officials... the former king and his mother... - plus artisans and smiths... people who may be useful to Babylon in practical ways...

At the time, some people in Judah really see this as a disaster, but others think they've dodged a bullet. The Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, hasn't destroyed their nation. Instead, there's a Jewish king on the throne and the city of Jerusalem and its temple are still mostly intact... surely everything can just carry on as usual? Jeremiah thinks differently... what they are experiencing isn't the end at all... it's not even the beginning of the end... things will become darker still for God's people. He was right, by the way: soon there was a second, more devastating invasion by Babylon.

Today we'll explore what it meant for those who have been exiled ... for whom the worst has already happened ... for these people to encounter God in their darkest moment...

I have sent you into exile

As a prophet, Jeremiah's role is to convey God's message to God's people. Here, in a letter, sent to the people in exile... you can see it in how the letter is addressed ... *to all the exiles whom I have sent from Jerusalem to Babylon...*

To these people, God says... You didn't arrive in Babylon simply because your nation couldn't stand up to the superpower of the age (although that's

true... they're tiny: they got steamrolled by the big guys ...) ... You didn't end up here because you were playing a dangerous political game (although that's true, too... Judah had sided with Egypt not Babylon). Instead, Jeremiah points out that underlying all this human behaviour is *God's act ...I have sent you into exile...*

Why? Because the biggest threat to their wellbeing is not the Babylonians, but themselves... by not living as though they are God's people... by not keeping the covenant God made with them all those years ago.

Live and thrive and seek the welfare of the city

Now in Babylon, I wonder how the exiles felt? Had they formed an escape committee? Were they making plans to take Jerusalem back again? Or were they consumed with grief? A psalm that dates from around this period contains a potent mix of despair and fury – it's Psalm 137 – and it begins *By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion...* you know the song!

Yet Jeremiah's message to the exiles is so different in tone: *Build houses and live in them, he writes, plant gardens and eat what they produce...*

Don't just survive, Jeremiah counsels, *live*: and not in a tiny, isolated huddle, but openly, generously... *seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you*. The exiles' welfare is profoundly interconnected with that of Babylon.

Most scholars consider the cultural trauma of exile deeply shaped the Jewish faith ... In Babylon, God's people are learning to live without the totemic heart of their lives together... without the temple, the king and the land. It's thought that at this time the exiles are reimagining themselves. Large parts of the scriptures are gathered, reflected on and edited ... and the practices of life and faith are, creatively, out of necessity, transformed... So many other nations conquered by Babylon have left no trace... yet these people's writings remain... they are becoming a people of the book...

This summer, we have experienced for ourselves the reality of climate change... We could say our situation is a bit like that of God's ancient people at this stage in their story... things are bad, but they are going to get worse. What should we do about it? We could be like some people left in Jerusalem, who are thinking... King Zedekiah's in charge and everything is

going to be fine... or we could do as Jeremiah counsels the exiles... be honest about how things really are and faithfully and diligently seek out ways to live and thrive *in those circumstances*... Just as for God's people, it won't be easy...but we can hold onto God's promise that Jeremiah shares with his readers: *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

I have not abandoned you... I will be found by you

Jeremiah tells the exiles they should prepare for a long time away – 70 years – even if that's not a literal number, it's suggesting multiple generations. But he also gives them God's promise: they may have left the place where in their imagination God lives (Jerusalem and its temple), but God is still near to them: *when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you*, God says. *When you search for me, you will find me...*

Remember when we thought about the story of Moses, where God talks to Moses about hearing the people's cry when they were enslaved. How important that story would have been to God's people in exile! *When you call upon me*, God says, *I will hear you*. You might see the cry of pain in Psalm 137 or the book of Lamentations as a shared calling out to God, a shared handing over to God of the crisis. And for us now, in the uncertainty of our own times, how important it is to remember that we, too, can call out to God and know that we are heard.

We might also think about the role that Babylon plays in all this. At times, Jeremiah has God refer to Babylon as *my servant*... as if this huge empire is doing God's bidding. And in a way it's true: the Babylonians are a means of recalibration, providing the occasion, the circumstances for God's people to seek God again. I wonder how challenges in our lives can offer us similar occasion... the space for willed dependence on God, for receiving God's gifts of resilience and creativity...

Finally, as we think about crises in our lives and in our world, here's a reminder: when we turn towards God, we'll find God is there, waiting for us... accompanying us through the darkest valley... leading us into the light and hope that God graciously gives.