

Sunday, 27th June 2021- sermon for online service and evening prayer

Exile and Peace

Psalm 137, 1 – 4 (or 1 – 6)

1 Peter 2, 11 – 12

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.

1 Peter 2

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Living Godly Lives in a Pagan Society

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

"By the Rivers of Babylon" – the beginning words of Psalm 137 were made famous by the pop-group Boney M in 1978. We heard the first few verses of this bitter sweet, melancholic psalm as our first reading. It shows the sadness of a group of people who find themselves far away from home. The writer whose lyric persona assumes to be one of the group, tries to convey the feelings of Israelites who were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon after their city, Jerusalem had been captured by the Babylonian king. It was an event that shook the lives of the citizens of the city but also the kingdom of Judah. Following the conquest of Jerusalem a comparatively small number of people, the various Biblical and secular records talk about ca. 800 was taken away into exile. 800 was perhaps 10% of

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the population or even less, and it was the elite, the leading families of the land, the wealthy and privileged who were involved.

Whilst away in captivity, the exiles remember their homeland which was more to them than just their home-country. Jerusalem had been “God’s City” – the centre and focus of the religious life but also the political and economic. The Bible tells the story of the people of Israel, from the very beginning at creation to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. All the books and events that happened lead up to Jesus. The so-called history books which give an account of the kingdoms of Israel and Juda are a considerable part of this narrative. And the political and cultural history of Israel is divided into two halves: before exile and after exile.

For a long time, the kingdom of Israel, first as one united realm and later as two separate kingdoms, those of Israel and Juda, played a political role as a local and regional power. At times, through clever alliances and making good use of opportunities on offer, the nation prospered and was a power broker and force to be reckoned with. At other times, the country was defeated and under pressure, internally and externally. The Biblical accounts give a rather stylised version of events, often simplifying matters and anyone interested in what happened in detail will need to study the accounts of other contemporary historians, i.e. those from Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia or later Greece and Rome.

In order to consolidate his power and prevent future uprisings, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar deported the ruling class, the elite from Jerusalem to the city of Babylon in the East. The majority of the population, though stayed in their homeland being governed by leaders who had been appointed by the Babylonian king.

For the exiles it must have been quite a shock, at least at the start. They had been the elite in Jerusalem, were the leading families, well-respected, wealthy, influential citizens who had to make a very strenuous, unpleasant journey and settle in a country where they were initially not welcome. From the Babylonian records it seems that the exiles were allowed to live in their own communities, with close contact with each other. Since they were the educated members of society, they were treated with respect and very credible attempts were made to integrate them into the royal court so that there was no danger of a future revolt or uprising. The story of Daniel, recorded in the book of the Bible that bears his name, is an example of how Israelites were given leading positions at the Babylonian court.

The overall lesson from the period of the exile is that God is with His people: God is with us, no matter what. The individuals may feel that they are just pawns moved about by the ruling powers and are victims of circumstances and events, but we are not abandoned. God did not disappear and abandon the Israelites. Just like during the various stages of the coronavirus pandemic, when places of worship had to close, God did not leave. The church buildings were shut, but God was and is here.

For the Israelites, the period of exile provided many opportunities. They learned that obedience to God is not directly linked to access to the temple in Jerusalem which had been the focus of the faith until then. Now, the people in exile found that it is possible to live out their faith without access to the temple which certainly helped to spread the message of God. Since the exile, Judaism began to expand and Jewish communities were established around the Mediterranean and it paved the way for the spread of the Christian message centuries later.

Also, those who were left in Jerusalem had to learn and adapt. Not much is known about them, but they too found new ways of worship, away from and without the temple and the elite who also supplied the spiritual leadership.

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The idea of exile can also be understood in a wider sense. At the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis tells what God had originally intended for humanity: to live closely with him in the garden of Eden. Humans and God were meant to be in a relationship, but this was broken through the wilful actions of men and women. Ever since then, God tried to re-establish this close relationship, first with the Israelites through whom all nations on earth should be blessed. However, this did not work out quite as intended. Again and again, the Israelites moved away from God, neglected their part of the special relationship so that in the end God sent Jesus who taught people how to live in harmony with each other and with God. Jesus also took on himself all the guilt and badness of humanity and through his death on the cross brought about the greatest reconciliation ever. Whilst alive on earth, Jesus explained that the kingdom of God was here. Already the prophets in the Old Testament had explained their visions, their religious experiences that showed them what one day would become a reality again. A kingdom of peace and harmony where all of creation, humans and non-humans would live together without conflict, appreciating each other as equals and being focused on God, praising him for ever. It took a long time for some to understand that this kingdom of God is not linked to any particular political power, is not dependent on this monarch or the other but goes across all nationalities and ethnicities, uniting all through the Holy Spirit. It is not just a distant hope, a vision of a bright future one day, but is already a partial reality. All Christians belong to this kingdom of God with its new and radical values that turn our understanding upside down.

In that way, every Christian, everyone who turns to Jesus has a new nationality, is a citizen of the kingdom of God. This makes all who follow Jesus exiles. We live in this world, have our home in one country or the other, belong to this region or city or that whilst having our true home in the kingdom of God. We live here because we can't yet be in God's kingdom.

The issue that believers of all generations, whether at the very start of Christianity or now have had to work out is that: how do we manage this period of exile. Peter, one of the first leaders of Christianity, was writing to new Christians about this. How to live in this world whilst really being part of another kingdom: the kingdom of God. Some Christians in the past and the present solve this for themselves by strict segregation. They keep themselves to themselves, form closely knit communities and stay separate from the rest. Think of communities like the Amish in America or the Bruderhof movement, the exclusive Brethren and others.

However, it is questionable whether that is really the answer. What Peter suggests is to be fully engaged within this world, to play an active part in the community but do so with integrity. This means rejecting what is bad but cultivating what is good. Christians as individuals and Christianity as a faith and institutions as represented by the different denominations do well to adopt what is good and noble from the world around us. Liberty, equality, fairness are all great values which all believers can embrace, whereas sexism, racism, hostility towards foreigners and discrimination against others are bad and must be rejected. Many of the great values of our current society are actually derived from Christian values and we can see how the so-called secular society reflects much of Christian teaching. Wherever people stand up for minorities and champion the rights of those judged by prejudice, they are actually living out the great commandment of Jesus: love your neighbour.

Peter encouraged the early Christians as exiles in this world to live lives that are beyond reproach so that all around them will see where the believers are from, namely the kingdom of God. So let us be good ambassadors of God's kingdom, showing to all that Christianity does not condemn people, does not reject but is open and embraces all.