

2 Timothy 2: 8 – 15 Jeremiah 29: 1, 4 – 7**“SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY”**

Introduction: Today I want us to listen for the Word of God in the book of Jeremiah. It may not be immediately obvious what Jeremiah, speaking into his situation, has to say to us in ours, more than two and a half thousand years later. Miroslav Volf, Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale University, in a book called ‘A Public Faith’ that informs much of this sermon, wrote these words. *“Religions, especially Christianity, are thriving in many parts of the world today. At the same time a sense of crisis has gripped many Christian communities in the West. Once they were the dominant social institutions in what was deemed to be ‘the Christian West’; today they find themselves increasingly on the margins, in some places even in exile....”* (p.77)

We know about that don't we? We see it all around our cities. Churches being sold to build Aged Care complexes or turned into apartments, restaurants, theatres and lecture halls. Those of us who grew up in the post-war (that is the Second World War) period have lived through a generation of the church's prosperity we know what it is to live in exile. Volf says, *“Western churches have a past they like to boast about but a future they seem to dread.”* (p.77)

2. Exile: We can understand "exile" as a metaphor for those catastrophic events that often come and bring radical changes in the lives of people, communities and nations. Like the Old testament Israelites in exile, some of those events are of our own decision-making. But other situations come upon us unexpectedly because of accident, illness and misadventure. It can come simply from growing old and realizing that some things now only live in the past. But exile happens. Exile is living in those times when all the old certainties are gone, when everything that we thought we were and everything that we had dreamed has gone - forever. That was the situation we heard described in the reading from Jeremiah tonight. The world those people in Judah knew had been taken from them by conquest and deportation to Babylon – to live in exile.

How do the people of God respond to Exile, whether in the sixth century BCE or in the 21st century? There are a number of possible responses and the book of Jeremiah canvasses them all.

(i) First, there was the belief that this situation was just a **temporary glitch** in God's plan for God's people. They regarded this exile as temporary and soon things would be restored to “normal” and the exiles would be returned to their homeland. In our exile

we see this attitude displayed by Christians who yearn for “the good old days” when the church was a significant power in Western society. I still hear people saying, “I can remember when we had 400 children in the Sunday School.” Their yearning for those days is obvious in their tone of voice. At Mumblers last Monday night, three of us spent an hour or more regaling one another with the things we remembered from that now distant past. It was educational for me as a new arrival in this neck of the woods. For example, I never knew that Highfield Road Methodist Church once had 2 football teams playing in the South East Suburban **Protestant** Football Association. (The Roman Catholics had their own Association. They didn’t even play against one another!) But I don’t think we were harbouring any hope that those days will somehow be restored.

Jeremiah’s message is that exile is part of God’s purpose. We cannot continue trying to change what cannot be changed. If we try, we may only be directing our energy to a futile effort to construct the world in a way that is most comfortable for us, rather than allowing God to bring us through the pain of change for something better. Our times call us to a mission as the people of God who are willing to allow God to work in and through the exile in which we find ourselves. Attempts at restoration of the past are futile, and unfaithful.

(ii) The second possible response is **retreat**. That is, to retreat from the world and create one in which we can hold on to the traditional ways of thinking, worshipping and acting that we are used to. (We might call that ‘a retreat to a ghetto’). Some Israelites did this – they asked, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” God was back in Judah locked in the Temple; Yahweh’s promised land was lost to them. What is Jeremiah’s Word to them? Exile is where God has placed them – that is where they have to live. So *“build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; Marry and raise children...But seek the welfare of the city... and pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”* (29: 5-7a) That is, embrace your exile and live as God’s people there. When the Exile did end, they never went back.

(iii) Third, Exiles could accommodate their lives and their message to those of the dominant culture. And many Jewish exiles did just that - they became Babylonians, took Babylonian wives and husbands and raised their children in that culture. They saw the choice was between accommodation and irrelevance.

So too today. We see many Christians abandoning the distinctive beliefs and practices of the Christian tradition in order to fit in with the contemporary culture. But in accommodation to the culture are the seeds of our own destruction. We lose our identity and the distinctive differences that make us who we are as witnesses to a different story, a different culture.

The task in our time of exile is to re-examine the old formulations, the old answers to life's issues to see if they really are faithful answers in our different historical situation of exile. In this situation we are called to examine whether our doctrines, our practices, our way of saying things and doing "church," have become pious idols that no longer communicate the living and active word of God for where are **now**.

3. The Task Ahead: Exiles need two things. They need to come to terms with the reality of where they are, and they need to have hope that there is a future. So what do we have to do in the situation the church finds itself?

We must accept that where we are is where God has placed us. So let us give up any yearning to be back in a time in the past: We are here – in this time and culture; with these people, circumstances and institutions. Where we are now is in this pluralistic, hostile and a culture largely unresponsive to Christian Faith. With that goes the threatening prospect that the institutional church and this building may not always be part of our future as the church of God here.

The word from Jeremiah is to accept the challenge to find ways to engage the culture in which we live because that is God's mission, and it is the essential outworking of the Christian gospel. *"The prophetic role of Christian communities – their engagement to mend the world, to foster human flourishing, and to serve the common good – is nothing but their identity projecting itself outward in word and deed."* (Volf p.96)

To do that task and be engaged in that mission means that Christians must know who they are and why the gospel at the heart of their life makes them different while living in exile. Our identity is established not by denying and combatting the world outside but by embracing and emphasizing what is inside – at the heart of Christian faith.

If we don't know what the gospel is, we lose our difference and become just another un-differentiated voice among the clamour of competing voices in the world. Our task is to learn to place the love of God at the centre of our life as a Christian community.

Conclusion: And in conclusion, what about hope? Our hope does not reside in anything we can do through chasing success in any sphere of human activity. Our only hope lies in the living and active word of God that does not settle for the old paths and familiar patterns. Our hope is trust in the power of God to bring God's own purposes to fruition. And an acceptance that at the heart of the Christian Faith is the conviction that the God of Jeremiah and the prophets and of Jesus, is one who works through the counter intuitive pattern of death and resurrection. **Amen.**