

JEREMIAH 29: 1, 4-7

Introduction

On September 11th, 2001, the world changed – cataclysmically and forever. Most of us sat glued to the television, watching with a mixture of horror and fascination as the World Trade Center Towers collapsed - the end of an age, or so it appeared at the time.

The parallel between Jerusalem, six centuries before the Common Era, and our own time is uncanny. For the Israelites the Temple was a symbol of their uniqueness as a people. The invincibility of Jerusalem was central to their belief system. Surely, their God would not allow His city to be profaned. The World Trade Center was the symbol of the West's economic invincibility, cultural uniqueness and power. New York is its principal city. Surely it was secure in the midst of the greatest superpower the world has ever known. At the time it was easy to identify with the angst of the Jews at the desecration and destruction of their temple, their city and their lives, for it appeared to be happening all over again – to us.

However it is now three years later. The world did not end. We have moved on with our lives, and those events are no longer so overwhelming. Our society survived, yet devastation and dislocation are still amongst us, in our communities, on a personal level. The destruction of lives happens all too frequently; if not to us, then perhaps to people we know and care about. Their temples, a metaphor for their lives, may be destroyed by marriage breakdown, job loss, drug abuse, serious illness or disease ... or a host of equally devastating reasons ... and their world changes all of a sudden and forever.

Jeremiah has much to tell us not only about dealing with cataclysmic loss in our society, but also in our own lives.

Trouble in the Bible

One of the more heart-wrenching passages in the Bible is Psalm 137, the cry of a people carried from their beloved Jerusalem into exile:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Ps. 137: 1-3)

Jerusalem was overrun. The temple, desecrated, lay in ruins; its valuable vessels carried off to Babylon with the king's court, leading public servants, priests and prophets; together with what was left of their army and artisans – thousands carried into exile. It was more than just a military defeat. It was a humiliation that crushed their spirit and destroyed their faith. How could they sing the Lord's song when everything dear to them was gone? How could they live and worship apart from the temple that was so central to their faith? Their despair was deep, and the hatred of their captors intense.

They were God's chosen people. They could not believe that God had abandoned them to such a fate. Surely he would deliver them. Surely the remnant in Jerusalem would rise up, overthrow the oppressor and send a force to rescue them, led by some new Joshua. Or surely some new Moses would be raised up from among them, and lead his people out of bondage back to the promised land. Surely this trial could not long endure. In their denial they listened to the voices that told them what they wanted to hear – the period in exile would be brief ... before long they would be restored to their rightful place. So they kept their bags packed, resisted collaboration and plotted against their captors.

Then they received a letter from Jeremiah that told them what they did not want to hear. Get used to it. The period of exile will be long – seventy years. Most of them would not see their beloved Jerusalem again.

Trouble in our world

In our prosperous and peaceful land, we have not had direct experience of invasion and violent conflict since the War of 1812. If not for the events of

9/11 it would be difficult to identify with the plight of the Jews. Even then, there is that matter of exile. In our society, only the Acadians, and the Japanese-Canadians interned during the Second World War, have any racial memory of such a dislocation. Yet, in our personal lives we may go through our own dark night of the soul – a personal hell we did not choose, and which appears will never end.

Many of us have experienced success in our lives. We do well in our jobs, get the promotions, the new car, the big house and thereby gain a sense of our own power. We start RRSP's and investment portfolios, space our children two years apart, holiday abroad ...live the good life. It all seems to work enough of the time that we convince ourselves it's true ... until something happens. The market crashes; a business fails; a marriage breaks apart; an employer merges with another and jobs become redundant; the doctor finds a spot on an x-ray ... a plane flies into a building... and it all comes apart. We believe that we have lost control of our lives when what we have really lost is the illusion that we were in control in the first place. It's a very hard lesson to learn.

I have personally experienced several of these life-altering events, and know the despair and sense of personal exile that results from them. Most of the time such exile is self-imposed. Our woundedness and shame keep us from accepting the help and support offered by family and friends. Sometimes it is imposed by others who just cannot bear to be around us; either because of our emotional state, or because their own is too fragile to have anything to give to us. Whatever the reasons, our exile can be very real, and very palpable.

When my first marriage failed my initial reaction was to fight – first of all to save it, and when that didn't work, to build a new life in a different place, far away from the people who knew my story and my shame of failure. Few of my old friends stayed in touch; perhaps because it is easier to side with the person who still resides in the community. Ultimately, my new life also came apart because it was built on a foundation of sand. Like the Jews in exile, I was

compelled by external events – events beyond my control – to stop and examine my life and my relationship with God.

Grace in the Bible

The letter Jeremiah wrote was not bad news, once the Jews got over the shock of having to face a lifetime in exile. Jeremiah was trying to get them to accept that reality. As a people they had broken their covenant relationship with the Creator, and it was a necessary part of God's plan for them that they have some time – a considerable amount of time – to reflect on where they went astray, and to rebuild their lives in a manner that would be pleasing to Him.

The good news is that despite all of their transgressions, God was not abandoning them. He had a plan for them. He was in control of that plan, and there was a reason for what they were going through. In order to help them with the process of renewal, he even gave them coping strategies.

Through Jeremiah, the Lord told them to build houses, to plant gardens and eat their fruit – symbolic of permanence and a settled life. They were to unpack their bags and move in. They were to get to know the neighbours – indeed to take wives, have children, give their children in marriage, and to basically get on with life, where they were, in the circumstances in which they found themselves. What's more, they were to help Babylon prosper, for its welfare would determine their own. Only by accepting their lot would they find happiness.

If they did as God told them, He would bless them, even in a strange land. Their numbers would increase, and they would flourish. Unlike the remnant in Jerusalem, they were to be spared the fire and the sword because God did have a plan for them. They were to be the seeds of the future for their people. Once they had done the hard work of change and renewal, and made themselves acceptable in His sight once again, their children would be restored to the Promised Land. As a people they would blossom once again. This was God's promise. They would have a future with hope, despite their past deeds.

Grace in Our World

The Good News for us is that God also has a plan for our lives – a plan for our prosperity and well-being. It is important to hold on to that because there will be times in each of our lives when we are in a place of exile – a hostile environment in the context of a relational, spiritual, emotional or physical place that does not make sense; which may indeed be uncomfortable, disagreeable, even painful. In that space, God's advice to the exiles will also speaks to us – build, settle, plant, eat, marry, have children, give them in marriage, increase, seek peace and prosperity, pray and give thanks.

Whatever we have done, or have omitted to do, we must have faith, as the exiles were told to do, that we will be restored to prosperity in God's good time, whenever we have learned the lessons God wants us to learn. We must trust that God loves us enough to discipline us. He will go to any length to re-establish a healthy relationship with us, even engineering our failures to restore us to a right relationship with Him.

When we find ourselves in that place of exile, we need to follow God's advice and face reality. Denial will not serve us well. The present is the only place we have to experience the richness of God. We are asked to grow God's miracle in the time and the place in which we find ourselves, to bloom where we are planted. We are not to give in to depression or to the frustration that arises from unmet expectations, but to experience the fullness of life in the present.

We must not to give up. God expects us to get on with life in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. What's more, we are instructed to plan for the future, where we are. God's plan for us will unfold in God's time not ours. Planning for the future engenders hope. Dwelling on the past often just leads to despair. Furthermore, we are to make a positive contribution, to be a blessing to the community in which we are living. By engaging in the world we will experience our own healing.

When we experience tribulation let us remember God's promise of hope. He may well be preparing us, as he was the exiles, for a new beginning.

