

Pentecost 20
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Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Psalm 66
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

A structure of meaning for aliens in a foreign context.

A friend who was a social worker recently joined the emerging profession of Life Coaching. People who consult Life Coaches don't necessarily seek help in a crisis. What they are offered is the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their life, gain a better understanding of its structure of meaning, and move forward in keeping with their discoveries and their choices. It is a bit like having a personal trainer in life matters. Life Coaching could be compared with a secular form of the Pastoral Care or Spiritual Direction, which the church still offers to people - but there is a difference. People of faith operate within a given story, which has many common reference points connected with the transcendent. On the other hand people who consult Life Coaches will operate from their own story, which may or may not have any sense of things transcendent.

The people of Jerusalem and Judah had lived through the devastation of being conquered. Their city and Temple had been wrecked, its treasures stolen. A series of deportations emptied the land of its leaders and many people. In Babylon the exiles were settled in abandoned villages where their material circumstances were relatively good, but their spiritual situation was desperate. The things they most cherished, and which supported their structure of meaning and purpose, had been stolen from them. Hope struggled to survive. Then came the spin-doctors – false prophets who, in an effort to blank out the pain, actively proclaimed an early return home.

From Jerusalem Jeremiah acted like a life coach. He wrote letter to the people in which he set out a structure of meaning and purpose for people living as exiles. He denounced the false prophets and predicted a long exile. He was like a negative pollster, but he had a deeper knowledge, and because of this he declared the people should get on with life:

*Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat the produce.
Marry and have children and see them marry.*

Jeremiah spoke like this, not because building, planting and marrying are practical necessities; nor was this a strategy to ensure the survival of the people. He spoke like this because of his understanding of God, the living God, whose word now accented the positive verbs in Jeremiah's call: **to build and to plant**. Remarkably, this accent was for a context where historical oblivion threatened. Against all obvious options Jeremiah coached them to live **as if** there would be a future.

Jeremiah was not loved for his message. Who wants to hear that a present period of exile will last beyond this generation? But the upside was the exiles were still the

objects of God's attentive concern, and Israel was called to be the bearers of hope for the future, regardless of the circumstances.

If Jeremiah's message was heard negatively, he became **really** unpopular when he called for the people to pray for their enemies: *Seek the welfare of Babylon and pray for it, for in its welfare you will find your own.* There is more than a self-serving realism at work here. Jeremiah's call to seek the welfare of Babylon was born of a high view of the sovereignty of God. The exiles were to work and pray for the wellbeing of the Empire because there was a relationship between it and the future of God in history. The people of God are not permitted to be partisan, to withdraw into a sect or a ghetto, become captivated by bitterness or obsessed with a false future. Israel is to live in honour of God whose purposes touch even the Babylonians. Israel's structure of meaning called it to live in a much larger historical horizon. Hostile Babylon and hostage Israel were servants of a greater purpose and God was not as hidden, absent or unavailable as it seemed. This place of suffering and alienation was where God's promises were still at work to renew and restore. Babylon became a place of resurrection, giving to Israel and the world fresh understandings of God's deeper purposes in history.

In exile Israel built houses and lived in them, married and raised children **and** re-engaged with its core story, and the God who gave it life. In singing its songs and praying its prayers so far away from home, Israel was caused to reflect on the culture in which it was immersed, and it took ideas from that setting and used them to restate its faith in new ways. Israel's view of God the creator was expanded. Living far from land and Temple caused the development of the Synagogue, which brought new ways of praying and hearing God's word. The eventual restoration to Jerusalem became a new and life-giving experience of the exodus. Instead of oblivion, a renewed structure of meaning emerged. Thanks to Babylon Israel learned afresh what it meant to seek God "with all its heart and soul and mind and strength".

There are many forms of cultural and spiritual exile. People find themselves oppressed and held hostage by many different things: loss of identity or recognition, change and fear. As we know, at the present time the situation for the Church and the Christian people is confusing and difficult. The language of Spirituality is all around us, while attachment to the traditional structures of meaning offered by our version of faith in God is weakening. Is this a form of Babylonian captivity for the Church? Do we not sit amongst people who do not have the memory, experience, or intellectual categories to assimilate the meaning of our stories and songs? This is an uncomfortable place to be, and while it offers us many opportunities, it is also fraught with danger. We may lose hope. In our attempts to escape from the pain of this situation we may turn in on ourselves, give in to false hopes, or look for a quick fix. Jeremiah's challenge is to embrace exile and get on with life, because this itself is a statement of faith. A demonstration our situation is not remote from God. We have to work out what it means to "build houses and gardens and lives of faith" in our time and place in history. And we have to pray for our context, for whether the world knows it or not its welfare, and ours, lies in the hands of the living God, whose name - "God with us" - we know and praise here.

At a time when we face another election, it is salutary to see that Jeremiah's vision of God was big enough to embrace both parties. There is a connection with Jesus'

healing work, which reached out to ostracized Lepers and embraced despised foreigners. As people of faith we are reminded that whatever our context it matters that we do not desert the story of God, whose sovereignty is over all. We are called to be eccentric enough to continue to live within our faith, even when the overt signs are that it has weakened or disappeared.

Bonhoeffer said that the Church is the hidden centre of the world. It sounds a bit arrogant, but what he meant is that the vision of God's sovereignty, expressed in Jesus' cross and embodiment of the Kingdom of God, is like a secret structure of meaning that shows where history is going, and in whose hands the outcome will finally be. In amongst all the choices and changes that confront us, this is the source from which we draw. It has the power to enable us to live, even in an alien and oppressive context. It shines a light, which can illuminate our choices, our prayer and our work. While we may find at times we need help or coaching to untangle some of the things that happen to us, what we are given has the power to coach us into life, when no sign of life seems possible. That is because it does not rely on us, but is a gift of grace from the One who is source of all.