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Seek the Shalom of the City

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Seek the shalom of the city into which I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom, you will find your shalom. (Jeremiah 29:4-14)

The theme of the 12th General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia in March 2005 was *Building Communities of Peace for All*. At the Assembly we were introduced to the theme in a variety of ways. But how will this theme continue to shape our story as Christians in Asia until the next Assembly in 2010?

By this theme we are called to be instruments of God's peace, intentionally seeking and implementing God's gift of shalom, not only for ourselves and our little Christian communities, but for all of God's people and the whole realm of creation. This is a breathtaking vision, redolent of the Kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus.

But in this Bible Study it is to the prophet Jeremiah we turn, in order to find a metaphor that might give us insight and hope for this call to shalom. The metaphor is *exile*, as we find it described in the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Exile happened for Judah and Israel in the 7th and 6th century BCE. In 722 Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, and in 587 Jerusalem of Judea fell to the Babylonians. As a powerful political control measure, it seems the significant people – the leaders (both civil and religious), the artisans, the community builders – were physically deported to Babylon as slaves, leaving a remnant of the poorest, “the vinedressers and tillers of the soil” in the city of Jerusalem and its surrounds.

A perusal of the prophetic texts such as Isaiah and Jeremiah suggests this catastrophe was not the result of Babylonian evil so much as a consequence of breaking the Covenant and of disobedience to the Torah, by Yahweh's people. This causes Yahweh huge distress and angst. Solomon and his successors had built an empire that disregarded those on the margins of society, with an elitist politics and triumphalist piety “where God and his temple have become part of the landscape in which the sovereignty of God is fully subordinated to

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the purpose of the King.”² Yahweh’s power is effectively apportioned to the Kings and Priests. In these texts, we repeatedly hear rejection of this royal theology and a call for a return to the covenant ways of Yahweh.

So, Jerusalem falls, and the Israelites are deported to Babylon as exiles. The result is a loss of land, of community, of leadership, of wellbeing and most importantly a loss of what we would call faith. Jerusalem falls and the temple is utterly destroyed in 587 BCE: their centre of religion and all that gives meaning to existence has been destroyed.

Now they sit in exile: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”³ There is dislocation, grief, hopelessness, confusion and insecurity. In their profound laments, they deny their own contribution to their dilemma; they long for the old days, and exude hopelessness.

The temptation for the exiles is to lay the blame for their plight on the Babylonians. But in doing this, their life as a community will continue to be framed by their Babylonian captors, they will remain paralysed as victims and unable to respond to Yahweh’s call.

What are the survival techniques for this exilic community? There are at least three alternatives:

- isolation and separation – becoming a sect to preserve the Jewish way of life (including worship); a kind of interim survival technique, that leaves the Jews in “victim” mode. It hopes that Yahweh will rescue them (soon), and their torment will be at an end.
- accommodation / assimilation / adaptation – a denial of what is important as the covenant people of Israel. This alternative does not anticipate a return to Jerusalem, so it denies the covenant relationship with Yahweh and a consequent loss of hope.
- retribution and rebellion or at least non-cooperation (and probable annihilation.) This too may be a choice to hold on to the past as the only way.

But Jeremiah, writing a letter to the exiles from Jerusalem, has another alternative to offer, a subversive and risky alternative. He says in effect that none of these alternatives is acceptable. “Yahweh has *sent* you into this exile, and there is a call on you, even in this place. Here is an opportunity for you. Settle down, marry, plant fields and build homes. You will be there for the long haul and I have a mission for you. I want you to work and pray to Yahweh for the wellbeing and peace of this city. As resident aliens, engage with locals, seek the shalom of the city; for your wellbeing as Yahweh’s covenant people will be entwined with and dependent on the welfare and peace of this city.” You are to *build communities of peace for all...*

This is radically different from mere survival, or even accommodation and conformity, and is most certainly not rebellion. Rather, the exiles are to engage with the people of Babylon, at the same time as remaining distinctively as the Covenant people. They will discover Yahweh is not only to be found in Jerusalem and its temple, but is with them in Babylon. In fact, the God whom they worship is God of the whole earth, including the Babylonians! So

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 1985), 34.

³ Psalm 137

there is possible joy in being in Babylon that is life enhancing; they can stand strong and grow, ready for return when Yahweh is ready for them. They are to end the lament and become a positive influence for God, loving and praying for their “enemies.”

And Jeremiah has more. Yahweh says, “Do not listen to the false prophets who are among you, I did not send them.”⁴

What is it that these prophets were saying? What is their analysis of the dilemma? Were they advocating a denial of the collapse of the Kingdom, or insisting that God would rescue the people quickly? We need to remember that Jeremiah believes that exile is within Yahweh’s intention for the Hebrews because they have broken the covenant and been disobedient to the demands of the Torah. But he writes in a powerful way that Yahweh will not desert them; they will be restored in Yahweh’s good time, and not by their efforts or their wishful thinking.

So we come to one of the most endearing of passages in Scripture: Yahweh says, “For surely I know the plans that I have for you, plans for your shalom, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”⁵ God “had seemed to the exiles to be hidden, absent, unavailable and ineffective,”⁶ but is now available. This is an amazing message of hope in the midst of despair, of light after the darkness of the night of exile, of God’s abiding loving presence through all. It promises shalom - peace.

So what does this biblical text hold for us, in our time and context? Let’s explore that with some questions for reflection and application in our context and time:

1. What do our Christian communities have in common with the exilic community of the 6th century BCE? What is the strange land, the “city of Babylon” for us? How have we been held captive? What do we lament?
2. How has our elitism and the way we have let the sovereignty of God be subordinated to the affairs of the state contributed to our exile?
3. Which is the greatest temptation for us in our situation and culture? Are we most likely to:
 - a. retreat into isolation as a sect, blaming others for our plight, and expecting God to rescue us?
 - b. accommodate and assimilate into the mainstream, giving away our distinctiveness and integrity?
 - c. deny that there is anything amiss because the system works for us?
 - d. Or is there another alternative?
4. What might it mean for us to “build houses, develop relationships and plant gardens” in the midst of our captivity?
5. Where do we see the ‘false prophets’ who offer a quick-fix solution?

⁴ Jeremiah 29:10

⁵ Jeremiah 29:10.

⁶ Walter Bruggemann, *To Build, To Plant* (Eerdmans/The Hanset Press, 1991), 33.

6. Where do we see signs in our culture, that Yahweh is not only Lord of the church but is Lord of all? In Christian language, what will it mean to join with Christ who is already out there, working in the community?
7. What does it mean to engage with the “Babylonians” and pray for them in our culture? What are some examples of seeking shalom, of building peace for all?
8. Where do we see the joy and hope born of the Spirit in our mission in the community breaking through in God’s plans for us?