

Reflection for the Third Sunday after Trinity (28.06.20)

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On Monday 2nd March, my university friends and I were merrily chatting on What's App about a planned weekend away in September. In the midst of the conversation, one of them said she'd been to a talk at work by a professor of epidemiology. 'I really don't want to spread fear,' she said, 'and I know it might sound scary, but he thinks Coronavirus is one of the worst epidemics for 100 years, since the Spanish Flu, and that 50-70% of the population will be affected, with 1% mortality. He predicted that schools will be closed and gatherings banned; there'll be travel restrictions and significant numbers of people will be working from home and looking after children. The risk of global recession is high. In the absence of a vaccine, the only tools we'll have at our disposal will be social distancing and hygiene. Guys, I think maybe we should plan ahead.'

I'll admit to being a little bit sceptical. In the weeks that followed, however, I kept revisiting that message, gobsmacked at how each of these predictions had unfolded with alarming accuracy. But, in truth, there have been so many different voices competing for our attention in recent months that it's been hard to know who to believe. And so, Tuesday's dramatic announcement of a significant easing of restrictions from 4th July was met with relief, excitement, fear and uncertainty, depending on whom you spoke to. Scientists and NHS professionals remain cautious, wary of a second spike; political sceptics wryly commented that the government was determined to fuel optimism, rather than addressing the finer points around the NHS Track and Trace system. 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life is a catchy number,' said one (*John Crace, 'Trust me, I'm Mr Fun: Boris Johnson loosens England's lockdown', The Guardian, Tuesday 23rd June*).

The Old Testament would-be prophet, Hananiah, was only too happy to assume the role of Cheerer-Upper-in-Chief to the people of the Kingdom of Judah, who were in exile in Babylon. Perhaps he'd had enough of Jeremiah's gloomy message of submission. 'Don't worry', said Hananiah, 'Within two years, the exile will be over: everything and everyone will soon be restored to their rightful place, for God will break the yoke of the King of Babylon.' Jeremiah raises an eyebrow. 'Amen to that!' he says, 'If only the news were this good! But, sadly, it's not. Many prophets have predicted that this is where we'd be, and I'm afraid you'll only be able to spot a *real* prophet when their prophecies come true.'

At this point, Jeremiah leaves, only to come back some time later with the news that God is going to wipe Hananiah off the face of the earth for making the people trust in a lie - which God duly does. And then, in Chapter 29, Jeremiah sends the most remarkable letter to the people of Judah, in which he tells them that - far from the exile being over - **they are to make their home in it**. 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' (v7) They are to live like this for seventy years, focusing on the needs of the people around them, trusting in God's promise

to restore their fortunes and gather them, once again, in the places from whence they've been driven. 'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.' (v.11)

We know - all of us - what it's to make our home in exile, because that's what we have done for nearly four months: and we have longed for it to be otherwise. But those of us who have been in exile from church know that what seemed like a disaster has proved to be, in fact, a place of hope and promise. Taken out of our church buildings, the people of God have come into their own, establishing networks of provision and care within communities. Through streaming services online, we have been able to share our journey through this experience with more people than we could ever have imagined - people who might never have crossed the threshold of a church. For many of us, this has been the longest fast from communion that we have experienced in our lifetimes and yet we are learning, I think, what it means to live eucharistically: to be blessed, to be broken, to feed others, to be nourished by our fellowship with God and with each other. All of which will make our shared sacrament more profound, when we are able to share it together again.

But this hasn't been everyone's experience in lockdown. For many, the place of exile has also been the place of captivity. The gap between those who have the means to live well, and those who struggle, has widened with enormous consequences. This period of exile has been a period of captivity for those with little or no access to technology, those who work in low-valued and low-income occupations, those who've been living with their abusers, and BAME groups, who continue to bear the brunt of all sorts of inequalities. Black pregnant women, for instance, are eight times more likely to be admitted to hospital with Covid-19 than white women. Not because of genetics or co-morbidities - but because of structural racism.

As these disparities have opened up before us, they have rightly directed us to, and reminded us of, wider societal and systemic injustices. Last Monday was Windrush Day, marking 72 years since a new generation of Caribbean migrants arrived on these shores. Many members of the Windrush community, decades later, were fired from their jobs and left destitute because the government declared them to be illegal immigrants. Despite the promise of the government to right these wrongs, there has been little or no action. Moreover, the Windrush scandal has drawn attention to the way in which the UK government has used (and continues to use) the threat of destitution as a tool to encourage people to leave the country.

'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.' As Jesus concludes his instructions to his disciples, his words are a reminder of our fundamental interconnectedness, our dependence on one another for life. But they are also a reminder to us that we are 'sent' people. We are called to be a people on the move from places of comfortable complacency to the hard edges of suffering and injustice. We are called to stand alongside the people we find there, at the edges - whoever they are, and however difficult it might be for

us - to listen to their lived experience, and to open ourselves us to the possibility of being changed as a consequence.

The place of exile may also be a place of captivity and that is what we have learned. But while we may long to return home again, I wonder if we can accept the invitation to stay a while; to seek the welfare of those we meet here, to pray and to act. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has said 'Exile is not a geographical location; it's a theological decision.' ('Conversations Among Exiles' from The Christian Century, July 2-9, 1997, pp.630-2) Lockdown has shunted us to the margins and made us look upwards and outwards. Many of us have - from different standpoints - experienced the inner movements of loss, longing and even loneliness, and that has brought us into closer contact with those who feel these things all the time.

The question is, will we be brave enough to make the choice to continue inhabiting this space, even when we can get back to the places and activities that represent normality for us? Will we be brave enough to seek better ways of relating to ourselves, to our neighbours and to God, through and after this experience? 'The Bible', continues Brueggemann, 'presents dislocation as a motivation for building a more just society.before us is the choice between succumbing to a fearful self-preoccupation that shrivels the spirit or heeding God's call to re-enter the pain of the world and the possibility of renewal and salvation.'

The choice is ours.

Amen.