

## SERMON 9<sup>th</sup> October 2016

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts do honour to you, O God. Amen.

Two years ago, our Pastor, Rev Dr Lance Stone, arrived here, with a long career of devotion to Christ already behind him, to take up his first ministry outside the United Kingdom. And he came full of the enthusiasm for which we have since come to know, and admire, and love him, determined to engage fully with this city, to face its problems and relish its challenges, and make it his home for as long as might be God's will. He has not wavered, and he serves us well.

But we can none of us forget completely who we are and where we come from, and this can surface in surprising ways, and when we least expect it. Just a few months into his new job, Lance had to tell Consistory that he would be going back to Scotland, on church business, for the weekend. But what he actually said was "I have to go back to the mainland".

It was an innocent slip of the tongue. But let me assure you that your church elders will work tirelessly on your behalf to make sure he never forgets it.

Now, I'd like to continue with the device I used in the children's address. Hands up, anyone who has read the Book of Jeremiah from start to finish.

Well, I can't say I blame you. Jeremiah does go on a bit, and it was a habit that made him very unpopular in Jerusalem around 600 BC. He was beaten, put in the stocks, imprisoned, and narrowly escaped execution, because the man just would not shut up.

The first half of the book that bears his name is exhaustive in the variety of its compelling poetic imagery, and magnificent in its consistent commitment to God's word. But the message is simply: Mend your ways, or there will be disaster. Only after 28 chapters of this, when the disaster has happened, and it seems that the only way is up, does Jeremiah begin to look on the bright side.

Because, in 597 BC, Judah falls to the might of Nebuchadnezzar, and is filleted by mass deportation. Jeremiah has been proved right, and the deportees know he was right, so perhaps now they will listen to some practical advice.

Well, when I say the bright side, I mean brightish. Jeremiah is still up against it, because there are those in Jerusalem, and in exile in Babylon, who still can't stand this doom-mongering bore, and don't want to hear his message. They want to be told that the exiles will be home again in a couple of years, so all they have to do is keep their spirits up. But to this Jeremiah says, literally, as it happens, "In your dreams". It will be 70 years before Judah is restored to its people, so you'd better

make the best of it; build your houses, work your land, make sure your numbers increase, and, vitally, work and pray for the welfare of this city you've been dragged off to, because you're going to be dependent on it for a while yet.

And indeed, it was not far short of seventy years, before Babylon fell, in its time, to Persia, and Cyrus the Great not only released the exiles, but commanded them to build a new temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem. But meanwhile, in the midst of the catastrophe, Jeremiah's forecast is seen as treasonable, demoralising a people in need of a rabble-rousing call to resistance.

And then something extraordinary happens. While Jeremiah continues to be reviled, and ignored, and thrown into gaol in Jerusalem, and the dismissal of his warnings results in a hopeless rebellion against Babylon, another mass deportation, and then another, that leaves only the poorest behind and Jerusalem all but razed to the ground – meanwhile, in Babylon itself, the people have started to listen.

For it is during the Babylonian Captivity that we find the final ordering and redaction of the Tora, and so the beginning of our Old Testament. It was the time when these families, transported from Judah, began to think of themselves as Jews, built the first synagogues, moved from sacrifice to prayer, and kept God's commandments as a necessary condition of their very identity; when they became a faith and a people in one, a community without a centre or borders, almost defined by exile. It is not too much to say that without the Babylonian Captivity there would be no Judaism, or Judaeo-Christian tradition as we know them.

For this was the birth of the Diaspora, the “scattering”, that in our own time vastly outnumbers the Jewish population of Israel, and in which the Jewish people of the world have consistently heeded Jeremiah's advice, growing their communities, keeping God's law, and yet still working for the welfare of the states in which they have lived – sometimes to the genocidal frustration of autocratic regimes -- Tsarist and Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany -- who found this paradoxical attitude on the part of an oppressed minority impossible to understand or oppose, and, therefore, far more dangerous than insurrection.

Six hundred years after the deportations to Babylon, Jesus, who was born in King David's land, but under foreign occupation, echoed Jeremiah when he replied to one of the many trick questions he faced from His religious establishment, in this case about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Rome, when He said “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” And the Romans didn't get it, either.

But our second reading this morning is not taken from the Gospels, but from the second epistle of St Paul to Timothy, written from prison, which is a different kind of exile entirely, but one that Paul was able to take in his stride, and as part of his job. He had already been in chains, and been released by a miraculous earthquake. He had been beaten, and stoned. More importantly, he had already

been disowned by home and family and friends, divorced from the comfort of familiar haunts, status and prosperity, just by hearing and following the call of Christ.

But Paul had an identity crisis of his own, perhaps greater than that of the Babylonian exiles. By the time of Our Lord, there were Jews all over the known world, which was pretty much synonymous with the vast Roman empire, at home everywhere and nowhere. And Paul was born in Tarsus, in modern Turkey, a long, long way from the Temple, a Jew -- but also a Roman citizen. To the Jewish religious establishment in occupied Jerusalem, he was both “one of us” and “one of them” in more ways than one.

And perhaps it was his human need to identify with just one community, to have just one identity, that drove him to become Roman Judaism’s most assiduous, and famous, and feared, persecutor of Christians, driving most of them out of Jerusalem and the rest underground, and to secure a commission to pursue them, all the way to Damascus.

Well, as we know, on his way there, everything changed. But in his new commission, to spread the word of Christ, cut off from his income, dependent on charity, and often facing hostility, he could at least draw on the experience and wisdom of his forebears, who had been shunted around at the whim of empires for six hundred years, unable to take even life for granted from one day to the next.

But much more than that, Paul is as pivotal a figure in our faith as Jeremiah. For when Paul decided to take the word of Christ to the Gentiles, he started a community of faith not just without borders, but without a common ethnicity, without a common first language, without a common cultural heritage. For Paul, Christ, a descendant of David, had burnt the rule-book, and His kingdom started from scratch, with no tests, no passports, no status, and no credit. We were to be part of Christ’s community through faith in Him alone.

And so the Christianity we know today, and of which we are part, was born. But that, of course, was not the end of the story.

In the passage we heard earlier, Paul tells us to “avoid wrangling over words, for it does no good, and only ruins those who are listening.” That’s in the New Revised Standard Version, which we use here, but I think “ruins” would be better rendered as “distracts and confuses”. If only the early fathers of the church had remembered that, instead of having punch-ups at their councils over whether the Father and the Son were of the same or similar substance, homoousion or homoiousion, in the Greek. It’s not the sort of debate you start from the pulpit if you want your congregation to come back.

But far worse than that, in the course of 1500 years the church that Peter and Paul had founded became an empire itself, drifted far from its original purpose, hopelessly corrupt, and seemingly more intent on maintaining the sanctity of its own traditions, than on preaching, and acting on, the word of Christ. This, more

than the political circumstances of the time, was what led to the Reformation; and to the names of Jeremiah and Paul we must add that of Martin Luther, to complete the roll-call of pivotal figures in the development of the tradition in which we worship here today.

Now, I'm not going to say that the Church of Scotland is the unimpeachable pinnacle of Christian civilisation. But I will say this for it; that although the constant revisions, and edicts, and guidance documents handed down to us from Edinburgh might sometimes be irritating, they do keep us from falling into the trap of venerating our heritage for its own sake.

They help to keep us true to the biblical symbol of the Church of Scotland, the Burning Bush that Moses saw, as related in the book of Exodus, constantly self-consuming and self-renewing. And they remind us that we are not, and must never be, comfortably in the main-stream of the societies we seek to serve. We must be on the edge, sometimes ignored, sometimes reviled, sometimes excluded, for in this increasingly faithless world, our exile is our identity, and defines our community of faith.

Now you might be wondering why, in a sermon about exile and community, I have not, so far, mentioned the humanitarian crisis that should be at the front of all our minds, arising from the tragically complex and seemingly interminable war in Syria, and the more than a million people who have travelled, many in desperation, and at great risk, from the Middle East, to our comfortable home of Europe, in the past 18 months. It's because I was saving it up for the punch.

Governments, I suppose, are obliged to draw distasteful distinctions, between refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants, and opportunists. "Wrangling over words", or what? But that is their job, and it is one example of why we pray for the wisdom of our political leaders. It's not *our* job, and a good thing too, because it would be contemptible in any Christian community, but especially ours, a gathered congregation largely composed of foreigners, to get sniffy about where people come from or why they are here. Our job is to welcome the stranger, unconditionally, with the love of Christ; because we are all of us, in our different ways, even if we were born here, strangers in this Amsterdam.

Let's go back, for a moment, to that first deportation from Judah to Babylon in 597 BC. Nebuchadnezzar took most of the nobility, the civil service, the artisans and the smiths – that is, the people who made the weapons - , thereby leaving Judah gutted and powerless. And part of the point was also to take these people to Babylon, unimaginably rich and splendid as it was, and to let them write letters home that said "Wow! You would not believe this place! No wonder we lost!", so as to rob Judah not only of power, but of hope.

But there was another, equally practical purpose to that deportation. The exiles might have been moved against their will, but they were not slaves. As Jeremiah's letter makes clear, they were given plots of land along the river, where they could

build and plant and harvest, and many of them prospered and became rich. And that was because the hub of this rapidly expanding empire needed their manpower and their skills.

That's what empires do. For example, as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch transported large numbers of indentured labourers from British India to enrich the workforce of Surinam, while the British were also transporting people from India, to East Africa, to run the railways and keep the books. The diversity of our societies that we now enjoy, that has caused so much more daily good than occasional harm, is the benign fruit of those callously practical empires. And of course, those days are gone.

Or are they? I'm not going to ask for a hands up here, but I'm guessing that there might be professional people in this congregation, maybe working in financial services or the law, who were posted here by a multinational company whose power dwarfs that once enjoyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

Maybe they were enthused by the prospect of a job in Amsterdam, this beautiful city, famed as the most cosmopolitan and liberal capital in Europe, with its wonderful, superbly maintained architecture and museums and world-class music and theatre, and its vibrant cafés and intellectual social life, it's warm and welcoming people. What a plum!

And then maybe they arrived, were immediately thrilled by the close-up beauty of it, and settled in with a little tourist walk around the centre; and then came upon the Oude Kerk, in the prettiest bit of town, Amsterdam's oldest building, let alone place of worship – and found it dependent for its survival on its use as a venue for exhibitions and corporate dinners, and surrounded by the brazen legality of the trades in drugs and prostitution.

And maybe then their hearts sank, as they were struck by the thought that Amsterdam is not liberal, but degenerate, and that they might as well have been exiled to wild and godless Babylon. And then, maybe, they found this church, one of a few, thriving oases of faith, exiled in a lamentably secular city.

I think again of those exiles from Judah, who finally listened to Jeremiah, and turned back to prayer and piety. Hands up any ex-pats here, who are now more actively engaged and involved with the community of their faith than they ever were at home?

But it wasn't always like this. The liberal, anything-goes secularism that has taken over here is a really very recent phenomenon. Talk to any native of this city in their 40s, and you'll probably find that they went to church when they were children, but didn't like it much, because they didn't like being lectured or made to sit still, and didn't keep it up when they became adults, because they don't really know what they believe, haven't thought about it much, and would rather stay in bed on a Sunday morning.

Well, we're all familiar with that last temptation. But that is how countless thousands of people, in a city that was once a thriving centre of Protestant faith, have slid, through neglect and apathy, and the seemingly more pressing concerns of their daily routine, into the secular life, estranged from a God they have not denied, but from whose community they have fallen away. Amsterdam has not been conquered, it has become secular by default.

And so you have to ask; Who, then, is really the exile?

Because the secular life is not a home. It is a motel room on a business-trip through the wilderness. Sure, it has a bed and a mini-bar and a TV, and it will do for a couple of nights. But nobody, nobody belongs there.

And that's why we're here. Jeremiah tells us that the welfare of the state in which we reside is also our welfare, but that cuts both ways. Our welfare is also the welfare of this city, we are here to remind it of its roots in Christian faith, and to catch the faithless when they fall. Oh, we can't say that secularism will disappear overnight, that all the exiles will return, all at once, after 70 years, or that some modern-day Cyrus will take over western Europe and command us to build new cathedrals at his expense. No. But come they will, one by one, or maybe in a trickle, and just maybe in a flood, and we have to be ready – we, and the Lutherans, and the Dutch Reformed, and the Catholics, and every beleaguered house of God in this city. When the exiles finally see through the drab con that is life without God, we must be here to say Welcome back. And Welcome home. That's our job. Amen.