

PENTECOST PROPER 23 C 2010

In last Sunday's readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Jeremiah lamented the destruction of the nation of Judah and of her prized city, Jerusalem, by Babylonian invaders 6 centuries before the birth of Christ. In turn, the Psalmist cried out on behalf of Judeans who were carried off into exile in Babylon. In the aftermath of this calamity, false prophets arose and began to testify that the occupation of Judah and the Babylonian exile would be short-lived. In a year or two everything would be back to normal. It therefore fell to Jeremiah, the Lord's anointed, to speak the truth – that the occupation and exile would last for generations, and that the people of God would have to adjust their expectations, and their lives, accordingly. Life would never be back to normal. The people would need to create a “new normal.”

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. ... Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” And just in case we understand this to be an injunction to create a Jewish enclave that perfectly mirrors the life of old and that is impervious to Babylonian influence, Jeremiah continues: “But 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.”

This is rather surprising. I would have expected God's word to be “Hold fast. Preserve the old ways. Create a Jerusalem in exile, based on the life you once knew. Separate yourselves from unholy influences. And above all, do not let yourselves be corrupted by those who chase after false gods.” I would have expected the God of Israel to counsel estrangement rather than accommodation.

It is certainly possible to live life completely estranged from our surroundings. It is even possible to embrace our alienation, and to define ourselves by our distance from and opposition to our circumstances. I know; I have done so at various times in my life. But Jeremiah tells the Israelites that God expects them to do just the opposite, and to embrace the alien nation – two words – and to rebuild their lives on its soil.

As I noted last Sunday, exile is not unknown in our modern world. Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank, New Orleanians living in Houston, Pakistanis displaced by flooding on a horrific scale, rural folk in every industrialized nation on the globe, on the move in search of a way to make ends meet. And then there is the less dramatic, less profound, but nonetheless real sense of dislocation and estrangement experienced by people like you and me, when a change in our life circumstances or our environment makes us feel like strangers in a strange land, or perhaps strangers in a land that was once familiar but is no longer the same. Parents of a newborn who discover that their accustomed life is no longer recognizable. Teenagers who change schools, or whose family moves from a place that felt like home to one that feels unwelcoming. Senior citizens who move from a house full of memories to a retirement community, or from a retirement community to an assisted living facility. A gathering of the faithful that no longer feels familiar, or comfortable, or embracing.

What are we to do in such circumstances? “Begin again, put down roots, be productive, and prosper” says Jeremiah. “Why?” you might wonder. Because to do otherwise is to be bad stewards of the time on Earth that God has allotted us, and to be bad stewards of the gifts that God has given us. We don’t get to stop the clock whenever life throws us a curve, and we don’t get to hide our light under a bushel whenever our expectations are dashed or our heart is broken. Yes, we do get to lick our wounds, and to lament, following Jeremiah’s lead, but we don’t get to remain stuck in place, much less glory in our estrangement.

We who are called to be God’s people in the world can never stop being faithful Christians. We can never stop living in ways that draw others to God. And that means building houses and cultivating gardens wherever we find ourselves, no matter the circumstances. It means creating safe spaces and fertilizing the ground, no matter how unpromising the terrain. It means working through life’s difficulties rather than recoiling from them. When we do this, when we refuse to let alienation and estrangement get the best of us, we grow closer to God. And we discover that God is ever with us, even in exile, and is eager for us to thrive, and not merely survive.

There is one more thing that God expects of us when we are in Babylon. In addition to building houses, planting gardens, and raising up the next generation, we are enjoined to seek the welfare of our city of exile, and of our captors. To seek their welfare, and to pray for them. This is quite a tall order, but as Jeremiah points out, our own welfare depends on it. And not just in the instrumental sense that if our captors are unhappy they will make us unhappy. Our fates are indeed intertwined, but the deeper point is that God loves and cares for captors and captives alike. For our friends and for our enemies. For us when we are at our best, and for us when we are at our worst. Including when we are our own worst enemies. Fortunately, God never tires of seeking to love us into righteousness. Us *and* those with whom we are in conflict. If we are truly the people of God, and the body of Christ, we dare not do less.