

A.M.D.G

October 31st, 2010Texts: Jeremiah 29
Psalm 137
Ephesians 3

Through Eyes Of Faith

Pundits tell us that we're experiencing something called 'economic and social dislocation' - a good term to describe the way so many of us feel 'dis-placed' - whether we're no longer in our homes, or in our jobs, or perhaps no longer in a place of confidence about the future - either for ourselves, our world or our church. Every night, the news tells us about one or another discouraging 'leading factors' - and then piles on us warnings about terrorist plots, updates on the death and destruction in places like the Middle East and Afghanistan, reports about corruption in one level of government or another, the degradation of the environment and the worrisome state of our educational system. And that's all before the commercial break! What's happening to our world? What's happening to our families, our communities, our churches - to the very fabric of our society? What can we count on now? Can anyone blame us for hungering for a little bit of good news?

We are not alone. The Jewish people, too - 600 years before Christ must have struggled with many similar questions. Our studies of the Hebrew Scriptures often focus on the terrible experience of their Exile in Babylon - and this week's passage from the prophet Jeremiah is no exception. It is portions of a letter addressed to the first wave of exiles taken by the Babylonians into captivity in 597 BCE. This first group, Jeremiah tells us, included not only the king, but the leaders of society - including priests and prophets - and all the skilled labourers and craftspeople. In other words - all those who could be of use to the Babylonian Empire. Ten years later, in 587, Babylon will return to devastate Jerusalem and carry off even more of the population - and then a third wave will be taken in 581. But in this letter to the first of the exiles - Jeremiah's words bring unexpected news - the last thing they expect or want to hear. This is not the good news they are hoping for. It is no announcement of imminent deliverance - indeed, no announcement of deliverance at all. Instead, they are instructed to put down roots in Babylon - to build houses, plant gardens, have families - and pray for the welfare of the place in which they find themselves. Unexpected - and no doubt, unwelcome news.

All of us can remember receiving unexpected news. The day the letter came or the e-mail popped up or the cell phone rang and brought good news: a new baby born, a successful surgery completed, an engagement, an acceptance to that college or university, a job offered. We have all been there - and the memory of those moments still brings a smile to our face and maybe even a tear to our eye. But there is also that other kind of unexpected news - the news that we dread and hope never to receive: "The baby was born but"; "She came through the surgery, but they were not able to removed all of the tumour"; "Thank you for applying, but" Surely there is some mistake! But there is no mistake - only terrible sadness, deep disappointment, the darkness of despair. Feelings of helplessness - even hopelessness.

Back in Jerusalem, the prophet Hananiah has been promising that the exiles would be back home in two years - tops. He is drawing huge crowds with his message of unbridled optimism. A letter from the likes of Hananiah would be just fine - but it is a letter from Jeremiah that the exiles get. Hunker down, folks, and make the best of it - he tells them - its going to be a long ride! Helpless and hopeless, they raise their lament:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there, we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" But how can we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?"

It is Israel's darkest night - and there seems no light in sight. Where is God now? The present reality in which

they find themselves is a harsh contrast to everything they had known and believed and understood about themselves and God. They felt abandoned - adrift in a strange land and homesick for the 'good old days'

We, in the church, can empathize, can't we - for aren't we, too, feeling adrift in a strange land - and homesick for the 'good old days'? This is a not an unusual lament for the people of God. Remember the Hebrew people in the wilderness? *"Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the fill!"*

Or the Israelites in today's reading: *"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."* And remember also the disciples on the Emmaus Road after the crucifixion: *"We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel ..."* It is the age-old lament of the people of God for the way things used to be; for the status quo. We are not the first to fear change, and turn longing eyes to the past. Like the exiles in Babylon - we want a quick fix and ready answers. We want things to go back to the way they were before. But there is no quick fix - and no certainties to hang on to.

That does not mean, however - that we are without hope. *"I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD (in our scripture reading today) - plans for welfare and not for harm; to bring you a future with hope."* (Jer. 29) Jeremiah is very much like the old man in our story today.* He helps the king and the people to see the reality of their present situation - but also the promise of what it might become if they are willing to work toward it. His spyglass enables them to catch a glimpse of possibility and hope. *"Change requires work," he tells them. "But one must first see before doing."*

Jeremiah is blunt with us in our reading today. Whining and pining about the past will not make it reappear. We need to embrace the place and time where God has us - even as we look and work toward what we might become.

Without the Temple and the familiarity of the place they had known and loved - the Jewish people in Exile had to learn all over again what it meant to be the people of God. They had to develop new ways of worship and being the 'church'. They had to think outside the box and colour outside the lines. And in this strange land in which the current church finds itself - so do we.

A couple of weeks ago, I joined 40 or so of my colleagues in ministry for a time of learning and sharing on the topic of leadership for today's church. The theme speaker for our time together was Peter Short - former Moderator of the United Church - a prophet in our day, much like Jeremiah was in his. In one of our sessions, Peter talk about living in the ruins of the 'ancien regime' - the twilight of the old empire. He said that the times we are in as a church require us to live in an atmosphere of ambiguity and not be swept away by anxiety. We need the ability, he said - not to run away from or try to anaesthetize our pain and sorrow and loss - but to embrace it. And then he went on to talk about the difference between fate and destiny. Fate is something that happens to you, he said. It overtakes you. And most of the time you are not ready for it and don't want it. Fate grabs you whether you are ready or not - and carries you off. Fate makes you a victim. On the other hand - destiny is something you don't want to miss. If you don't find and are not found by destiny - you never arrive; you never become who God is calling you to be in the world.

Like those taken in exile to Babylon - it seems to me that we, as the church in this present time, are standing at the crossroads between fate and destiny. Fate is the circumstance in which we currently find ourselves and over which we have little or no control - an increasingly secularized society, dwindling attendance and resources and an uncertain future. But we do have a choice. We can whine and pine for the

good old days - or we can fulfill God's destiny for us by having the courage to see and embrace not only what is - but what we might become. And whatever that new thing is toward which the Spirit is calling us - there is no doubt that we will have to think outside the box and colour outside the lines.

And, as in the story - the lens through which we need to see our future is faith: faith in the Holy One who has guided our ancestors in the past, giving manna in the wilderness and light for the next step; and faith in the promise: *"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."* Or in the words of one who lived hundreds of years after the Exile - but who lived into the hope of God's destiny: *"Now unto God, who by the power at work within us is able to do far more than we can ask or even imagine. To God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen"*

** References to the book 'The Spyglass' by Richard Paul Evans*