

Now, may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy spirit. Amen.

I'm afraid I owe our regulars an apology. I said last week, or no, the week before last, that the sermon series we've been having on Jeremiah was coming to an end. That was greeted with a sigh of relief, but I'm afraid I was misleading you, as he's back. This week and next week, there are two more readings about Jeremiah. I feel that it's only fair that we see him out because he has been extremely gloomy up to now, but in these last two weeks, he does improve and get better. Even though a crisis has overtaken the people, the people of Israel are in the worst situation they could ever be, but yet we find Jeremiah at his most positive and buoyant. You might not have thought that if you've just heard that Jeremiah reading and you haven't been here for previous weeks, but believe me, relatively speaking, that's Jeremiah almost giddy with positivity compared to what we've had in previous weeks.

As I've said, a crisis has developed since we last met Jeremiah. The people of Israel have been overrun. The Babylonian army has come into Jerusalem and taken the people away into exile in Babylon and left the city in ruins. We know that happened in the year 587 BC, so the passage that we've just had is a year or so later, and Jeremiah is writing to the exiles in Babylonia. That's what's recorded and kept in our reading. The poor and the workers were left behind in Israel, the idea being that without the leaders who'd been taken off into exile, it would be easier for the Babylonians to control them and get from them what they wanted back in the land of Israel.

We should note in passing that it's significant that the prophet Jeremiah has become so marginalized during his ministry that he's not even thought important enough to take away into exile. We know that the religious leaders and the official prophets have all gone with the king and the rich and the famous, but Jeremiah has been left behind. But those who he's opposed throughout his ministry have gone, and you can see that part of his

letter, the bits that have been cut out from our reading, are there to critique what the false prophets are saying.

Now, there's no doubt that the exile of the people of Israel was an extremely traumatic event. They'd been moved from the land that they'd been promised to them, in which their identity as the people of God was formed. They were forced to travel 700 miles across the Middle Eastern desert, leaving home, temple and hills, and in the new land, Babylon, which we now know as Iraq, the customs were strange, the language was incomprehensible, and the landscape was odd and featureless. All their familiar landmarks were gone. Israel's exile was an extreme form of what happens to us from time to time.

We can all have experiences of exile. You could say that we all start life by being exiled from the womb and are pushed into much harsher surroundings, and there are other exiles that we don't choose. Unemployment is an exile from the workplace. Divorce can be experienced as an exile from family life. Illness can be considered a form of exile. To be hospitalized is definitely to find one's self as a stranger in a strange land. I've had an experience of exile this week while I've been to see my dentist and my doctor, both for mild things, but they've both used the same sentence. They've both looked at me after examining me and saying, "Well, Mr. Hargreaves, as you get older ..." and they've gone on. I felt in those moments an exile from the health and vigor of one's youth.

The reality of our lives can be rearranged without anyone consulting us or waiting for us to give our permission. The essential meaning of exile is that we are where we don't want to be. We're separated from home. We're forced to be away from that which is most congenial to us. It's an experience of dislocation that may last months, years, or might even be a permanent situation. How are we to respond to whatever situation of exile we find ourselves in? We can, of course, complain or escape into fantasy or denial, and it's clear from the reading that we have from Jeremiah

that the people of Israel weren't responding perhaps in the most positive way, which is why Jeremiah has cause to write to them, because he hears that they're not doing well in exile.

The religious leaders who have gone with them into exile, who Jeremiah characterizes as the false prophets and diviners, they were nurturing their self-pity. The people of Israel were saying, "It's not fair. A terrible thing has befallen us. We're here in Babylon in the desert, while our friends are carrying on in Jerusalem as normal. Why us? The weather's too hot. The schools are substandard. There's no decent places of worship." They longed for Jerusalem. They wallowed in self-pity, and they wanted to be home. The false prophets encouraged them. "Don't worry," they said, "We don't deserve this. We'll be home soon." You could see that either side of the reading that we had this morning.

So Jeremiah writes to put them right. He writes this great, sensible, practical letter, which I think speaks not just to the people to whom it was written, but also to us in our exile. Jeremiah said, "Build houses and make yourselves a home. Put in gardens and eat what grows in the country. Marry and have children, work for the country's welfare, pray for Babylon's wellbeing. Don't let those so-called preachers take you in with their lies. Make the most of it. Build houses. Settle down. Make yourselves at home. You're not camping," said Jeremiah. "That's home for you. Make yourself at home. It might not be your favorite place. It might not be a place that you've chosen to live but it's the place you've ended up in. Dig foundations. Develop the best environment for living that you can."

Jeremiah's saying "if you just sit around and pine for Jerusalem, your present lives will be empty and squalid. Your life now is every bit as valuable as it was when you were in Jerusalem. Babylon's exile is not your choice, but it's what you've been given. Build a Babylonian house and live in it as well as you are able." Doesn't that make sense? And thinking about it, what other choices have they got available to them? Jeremiah's letter to the exiles is

both a rebuke and a challenge, and it's a challenge to us. The aim of the person of faith is not to be as comfortable as possible, but to live as deeply and authentically as possible in the place that we've been allotted.

I've heard it said that there are two kinds of people: those who worry about what they don't have and those who give thanks for everything they do have. Will we live on the basis of what we don't have, or with gratitude for what we do have? Of course, that theme of thankfulness is in the gospel. Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one comes back to give thanks. Cicero said, "Thankfulness is the mother of all virtues." We're all to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

Going back to that Old Testament story, we discovered that the people of Israel took Jeremiah's words to heart. They learnt a great lesson that strangeness can open up a new reality to us. The people did heed his advice, which is why, presumably, that letter and the story that went with it was preserved. The people of Israel did build houses and settle down. They discovered what it was to be God's people in exile, and the result was that the period of the exile turned out to be the most creative part of the whole history of the people of Israel.

It was in exile, for example, that what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures were largely written down and recorded, because they didn't want to lose their identity. They collated the scriptures that had formed them. They lost everything that they thought was important, but they ended up finding what was really important. They found God in their time of exile. Exile reveals what really matters and frees us to pursue it. William Faulkner said, "It's hard believing, but disaster seems to be good for people." That ended up being true for the people of Israel. Exile was the worst that revealed the best. When the trappings were stripped away, they found what was essential, and they found that what was essential to sustain them in that time of exile was God.

I want to finish by something by way of an extended P.S. I couldn't help but notice that three times in the passage, God says that "it is I who carried the people into exile," and that would be news to the people of Israel. They thought it was the Babylonian army that had carried them away. No, God makes it clear that He was working through them, a classic case of God working in very mysterious ways. God's ways are not our ways. The people would never have chosen exile. God chose it for them. God chose the Babylonian army to execute his plans. The passage also reminds us that God's time is not our time. The people wanted to come home immediately, but in the later verses, we see that God said it were to be for 70 years, for a whole generation, that those who received Jeremiah's letters were never going home. It was to be their children's children who would eventually go back and rebuild Jerusalem.

I can't preach on this passage from Jeremiah without mentioning the verse that comes after the bit where ours ended. It says this: "'For surely I know the plans that I have for you,' says the Lord. 'Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'" Great words of comfort to these people who'd been taken miles away from their home, and comforting too for us. Remember, these words were given for people who for 70 years were to be in exile. It wasn't the kind of plan that the people wanted, but it was God's plan. So let's take a moment to reflect on our lives. Where have we been in exile? Maybe we feel as if we're in exile now. Do we feel as if God has a plan for us?

Amen.