



Jeremiah 31.7-14
John 1.10-18
3rd January 2021

'Joy after Sorrow'

Whilst on retreat, a few years ago now, at a Benedictine house in the Cotswolds I, along with the other Baptist retreatants used to attend Vespers as the day drew to a close.

Of course, it was all very different to what we were used to with not a worship song in sight! But that, in a way, was its beauty, experiencing the integrity of that Community as we prayed together.

I think one strange, yet moving, ritual struck us all. One of the sisters was to leave the house for a day or two. So, the night she left, in the chapel at Vespers, the other members of the Community encircled her and prayed God's blessing upon her. Two days later, on her return, once again in chapel, they gathered around her again and welcomed her home with prayer.

It felt like such a loving family thing to do and I think it moved all of us who witnessed it, especially the welcome home. It was so full of joy as the Community once again became a complete household.

Today's reading, for this the first Sunday of a New Year, is about returning home.

Exile is a big theme in the Jewish scriptures. This vulnerable nation was often invaded with its citizens being captured, taken away and forced to live in foreign lands. Hence that well know prayer: *By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept.*

The prophet Jeremiah spoke into this situation and often did so with a word of reprimand to the people. He loved his country but

deplored the way so many seemed to reject God and his message.

Yet, in the middle of what is sometimes quite a tough read, we have these few chapters around Jeremiah 31 which are sometimes called the Book of Comfort or Consolation. The tone changes and becomes lighter and more hope filled.

In today's passage God talks, through Jeremiah, of this vast company of people, now in exile, coming home to Jerusalem where he will welcome and embrace them.

We sometimes think of God with that false dichotomy of being harsh in the Old Testament yet loving in the New. Nothing could be further from the truth in Jeremiah 31. This is the God who longs to be called 'Father' and who so desires to welcome the people home.

Jeremiah is painting a picture of a God whose generous love makes this possible. Up to this point he talks of the people's failings in that they turn so quickly from the ways of God. Yet still they are to be welcomed home by a God who is full of grace.

Generous love makes new beginnings and fresh starts possible. That's the message of the Prodigal Son narrative in the New Testament. And here Jeremiah sets before us a God who is full to overflowing with generous, welcoming and merciful love.

And that dynamic is true in our own lives too. How many times have we fallen over, maybe thinking there is no way back? Yet someone close to us hasn't closed the door but left it ajar. Their generous love, reflecting the grace of God, restores us and, in a sense, welcomes us home.

They will return in love and secondly, they will return in joy.

There is a blessing offered by The Northumbrian Community that talks of sending us out after a service with the hope that soon *God will bring us home rejoicing, once more within our walls.*

It's a warming thought that church can be thought of as 'home', a

place to find nourishment and support.

Well, Jeremiah envisages his community returning from exile singing. Here's his eloquent words in verse 12: *They will come with shouts of joy to Zion's height...*

A member of the congregation here at AFC said she remembers as a girl attending a service at church at the end of World War Two, a service which began with the hymn: *Now thank we all our God...* I guess many sang it that morning with tears of both joy and sorrow falling.

2021 looks like being a different year from the one we've just left behind. The prospect of mass vaccination offers us a much more positive future and maybe we too will want to sing, if we can once again find our voice, *Now thank we all our God.*

Maybe in these coming months we'll rediscover something of our old way of life, yet in that process the most routine actions of the past such as shaking a hand or sitting close on the tube will have a different perspective about them.

Terry Waite tells a story of the day he was unexpectedly given a bowl of cherries whilst in confinement in Syria. For so long he had spent every day in the half light of an airless room yet now there was a bowl of bright, glistening cherries in front of him. The beauty of their intense colour, something he had missed for so long, in that moment meant the world to him. So, rather than eat them straight away, he wanted, instead, just to gaze upon them and drink in their beauty.

I suspect there will be moments when we catch our breath, smile and rejoice that once again we can hug a grandchild or invite round anyone we like for a cuppa.

Imagine returning home to Jerusalem from exile; it must have been somewhat overwhelming. To be home once more, able to communicate with everyone, to pray at the Temple, albeit in ruins.

Some talk of these days as the Great Reversal as if the fortunes of the Israelites were now turning round.

Yet, there is something in this part of the chapter that also sounds a note of caution in our rejoicing. We are told many came home weeping and in grief.

It's clear that they would carry the trauma of exile with them for some time to come, even once home. And it is clear too, that our progress out of the days of Pandemic might feel traumatic as well. None of us have travelled this way before yet all of us will have felt a certain sense of loss last year.

So, these days before us need to be ones of loving kindness as we walk gently beside one another, not demanding a false optimism but offering a listening ear and a supportive shoulder. Trusting that these words of Jeremiah will be true for us as God says: *I shall turn their grief into gladness and give them joy after sorrow.*

So, we are with the exiles this morning returning to Jerusalem and Jeremiah is our leader encouraging us on the pilgrimage.

He urges us on exhorting us to travel in love, in joy and finally in hope.

In this chapter there are no less than eight affirmations of hope. This so call Book of Consolation within the wider book really is somewhat atypical of the rest of the prophet's writings.

He envisages that new beginnings are truly possible, phoenix like they can rebuild from the rubble.

During this last Advent, like some of you, I received a daily blog from the writer and retreat leader Brian Draper. In one he shared this picture of the bombed-out shell of St Mary's church in Southampton during World War Two. I was struck by the resilience of the congregation as they gathered on rickety chairs to pray together. Such wonderful stoicism and faithfulness. I actually find it a deeply moving photograph as clergy, choir and congregation re-

form in the ruins to recommit themselves to new days with God being their helper.

It's the picture I'll keep in my mind as we 're-form' here at AFC during 2021. Our church hasn't been bombed but it has, like every other community in the world, gone through traumatic days and we need to recover. To recover our confidence and I hope, and pray, that we will do it with as much determination as shown by those in this inspiring photograph.

Of course, there is never any 'going back'. The old adage rings true that *'the past is another country; they do things differently there'*. We will always be going forward, to a new place in a new time.

The value of liturgy and tradition is that it becomes a framework, a scaffolding, upon which we build fresh worship and contemporary service.

As one of the lecturers used to say to us at Theological College, part of our calling is to find '*new addresses*' to which we post the gospel.

Our church framework and liturgy will seem familiar, yet into it we will pour the new wisdom, experience and trust that has grown amongst us during the last twelve months.

And so, a New Year stretches before us. Let us enter it this first Sunday with Jeremiah's words ringing in our ears, words of love, joy and hope as the Lord says: *I shall turn their grief into gladness, young and old will rejoice, I will lead you by streams of water and watch over you like a shepherd.*

May it be so in the name of the God who travels with us from the old to the new. Amen

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