

Remembering who we are.

It's the first Sunday of a new decade which seems a suitable time to be listening to the words of a prophet from 2,700 years ago.

Jeremiah had the most difficult of all tasks. He had to proclaim the future God had in mind amid disaster. Imagine being in Australia while the flames are raging and telling everyone that the land will be like a garden, with full restoration and new homes.

I'm not sure the dream of the future will help with the current devastation but that was and is the work of the prophet...to declare the alternative future of God amid the present reality of destruction and death. Tough job.

Jeremiah is speaking during the exile and it's about exile that I want to speak this morning.

Let's start with a quote from Gavin and Stacy.

If you weren't here at the Carol service you will have missed me confessing to how much my family were looking forward to this year's Gavin and Stacy Christmas Special – 10 years on from the end of series three. What James Corden and Ruth Jones have always been able to do is weave genuine emotion and truth and longing through the comedy and cartoon characters of the show.

In this year's Christmas Special Stacy is worried that after 10 years of marriage she and Gavin are drifting apart. As the parents of three children they have reached the point where Christmas presents to each other are new kitchen cupboards. Stacy persuades Gavin to meet her at the famous spot on Barry island where they first said they loved each other and she talks with him saying

*I don't want us to stop being Stacy and Gavin. I want us to stay as us.*

It's very easy with all the responsibilities that come; to become exiled from who you really are...you become someone else. That doesn't mean everything is terrible – in the story Stacy says she wouldn't change being a parent for all the world...but still...she doesn't want to forget or stop being herself...or as she puts it Stacy and Gavin.

Exile is not just being somewhere other than your home.

In terms of the Old Testament text, Jeremiah has seen the destruction of Jerusalem and seen the exiles being taken as slaves to Babylon. The kingdom of Israel has been shattered and all the fit, strong and capable adults are hauled off into slavery leaving behind the wounded, sick, elderly and infirm. Typical of the Old Testament, this is seen as the work of God.

Jeremiah has a vision of a different future to those around him. The slaves settled in Babylon – they had no choice, and the danger is that they forget who they once were and God's purpose for them. For Jeremiah it is not the end of the story. Imagine the horror of all they have seen and experienced and they are far from home and then he says these words...

"Sing with joy for Jacob;  
shout for the foremost of the nations. (in slavery!!)  
Make your praises heard, and say,  
'Lord, save your people,  
the remnant of Israel.'

Remembering who we are.

<sup>8</sup> See, I will bring them from the land of the north  
and gather them from the ends of the earth.

Among them will be the blind and the lame,  
expectant mothers and women in labour;  
a great throng will return.

<sup>9</sup> They will come with weeping;  
they will pray as I bring them back.

I will lead them beside streams of water  
on a level path where they will not stumble,

'He who scattered Israel will gather them  
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'

It struck me that only the fit and able were taken into exile, but  
God will bring everyone, blind, lame the expectant mothers –  
everyone back home again.

Moreover...it is God's initiative to do this and God who will  
accomplish it.

I don't have an Old Testament view of why disaster happens. I  
don't accept that God punishes and brings disaster and my  
evidence is Jesus Christ in the New Testament who brings grace  
and truth to the most hopeless of sinners.

But disaster does happen and wars and famine and plagues and  
yet we are to be like Jeremiah and declare a different future that  
God will accomplish. We need to remember we are his and to work  
toward the creation of His kingdom.

Even without great disasters, we can slip into exile. When faith  
become something other than a relationship between the Creator  
and the Created we can find faults with church, with organised  
religion, conflicts can arise, problems emerge and far too  
frequently there are casualties who drift from faith because the  
outworking of faith masked what it should always be. Grace and  
truth.

The grace is God's initiative of love towards us.  
The truth is who Jesus is and who we really are.

There are those who become exiled from the faith community but  
there can be those within it who are exiled from themselves (which  
is what Stacy was worried about).

More theological truth...this time from Worzel Gumidge the  
Scarecrow of Scatterbrook farm. Mackensie Crook both wrote and  
starred in two new Worzel Gumidge programmes and both were  
beautiful. In the first, the seasons have become stuck and Worzel  
has to find the key to unlocking the seasons but he cannot  
remember what it is or how to do it. When he finally discovers  
what the truth is, it's only when he gathers with the other  
scarecrows that together they remember what to do. They start to  
chant and sing and then dance. They recover a shared memory  
and remember how to create the complicated crop circle that will  
unlock the season.

Mackensie Crook said he wanted to write something mystical and  
he certainly achieved that.

It's just a story...but it reminded me that any of us can forget who  
we are and that God calls us into sharing his Kingdom and our part  
in it just by being uniquely ourselves.

Remembering who we are.

Curiously for us, the way to remain centred in who we are is to look at the person of Jesus Christ and not just look but embrace.

The Apostle John wrote...

*<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup>He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

That's who I really am and it's ever so easy to forget, to become distracted and exiled from being God's child even while being busy about the life of faith and the kingdom.

It should be something we keep at the heart of our gatherings and corporate faith. Remembering who we are and who others are. We are children of the same heavenly father.

It's a new year. What do you face this year? What lies ahead? There are the things you know about and as ever there will be the unexpected. I'm starting the year with the booklet about Transforming Trinity and a plan to visit every member of the church.

Whatever the future holds (forgive the cliché) we know who holds the future. What we can do is to remain rooted in grace and truth – that is in Jesus Christ. We don't lose our identity in him, we find it completely. One thing I would love to encourage this year is that we learn to see ourselves and accept ourselves and maybe even learn to love ourselves as Jesus does. And that's possible when we receive him ever more fully. Let us pray.