

Sermon Lent 4 Year B 2018

One of things that might help us understand and appreciate the Old Testament better – and let's be honest, most of us struggle to make some sense of it – is to simply identify some of the key moments. The long history of Israel really centres around two key events: the Exodus – the delivery of Israel out of Egypt, (with the giving of the law and their wandering in the wilderness); and the exile into Babylon. Both these events are so important, so critical, so formative to the Jewish religious imagination that without them there would be no Jewish faith.

What we have heard today in the first reading from Chronicles merely gives us a snap shot, a little thumb-nail sketch. But in fact, an enormous amount of the biblical record is shaped by the traumatic, though formative, experience of the Exile. So much of the Old Testament points to the imminent disaster, is a reflection on it when it occurs, and then is the record of the aftermath. Exile become the critical moment in Israel's self-reflection, and self-discovery. Now, in the biblical imagination, the exile was the result of Israel giving themselves over into self-indulgence, the pursuit of pleasures, the oppression of others, and worship of idols. They had all but abandoned their relationship with God. They had become distracted. They didn't bother listening to the warnings of the prophets. They thought it was ok to be just like everyone else.

The human heart, as we know, has an astonishing capacity for self-deception, to ignore the warning signs, to deny the truth of things. My brothers and sisters, such warnings are now given to us. The church has for so long sought respectability and concession, lured by the attractiveness of status and influence that it has so weakened our life and identity and undermined our mission. So many of our churches are so deeply compromised it is hard to imagine their survival. Over many decades our leaders have fostered the hope that by political action, legal efforts or even by embracing the cultures' ideologies, that it can prosper or survive. But such actions have in fact weakened our Churches and left us unprepared for the future. Now, we must be sure to say that the Church itself – in the sense of God's people; the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church— will *not* be lost. It cannot be. Christ is true to his promises. He does not abandon his people. Rather, the public, easy, culturally acceptable way we do church is gone. And to be frank, not too soon! And so, we face a situation where, short of divine intervention, the Church too is moving into exile.

As we come to accept the immensity of the cultural shifts unfolding around us, we Christians in the West need to learn to *own* the Biblical word for what we are entering. Now, historical illustrations such as the Titanic (or the Dark Ages or of totalitarian rule in Russia etc) can take us only so far in our understanding. But we must appropriate the Biblical image that speak directly to our situation: *Exile*. And we must help one another to accept the reality that Exile *is coming* to the Western Church. Pretty much everything we have become used to on how to manage, fund, grow and lead churches is going to have to change. People's expectations of career for themselves and their children will have to change. People's commitment levels to church will have to change. We face powerful ideologies allied to governmental forces. But also, I am afraid, compromised mainline denominations and a compromised hierarchy.

A key lesson is that faithful Christians are going to have to work hard to come to terms with is the speed at which governments are beginning to legislate against Christian beliefs. In this country and many others there are rafts of legislation addressing so-called extremism. But extremism is defined very vaguely, such that it can catch up not

just Islamic terrorists, but also Christian parents, Jewish schools and even people who take certain views on global warming! Christians need to realise that the law is no longer on their side. In some jurisdictions children are being removed from parents under the charge of child abuse simply for maintaining traditional biblical faith. Let me stress: simply for being a faithful Christian. Are you ready for that?

As this new reality unfolds about us, the Church must accept that the Exile could well last centuries. The outworkings of that and the full suffering of Exile is far from complete. The Egyptians and Babylonians had many ways to increase the suffering of God's people: more bricks with less straw, a newly built golden statue, the lion's den. Our Exile will not be identical to the past Exiles – but it is clear in the Bible that Exile is often multi-generational. The cycle plays out from parents to children to grandchildren to great-grandchildren and beyond. Are you ready for that?

Helpfully, though, we get a lot of history packed into the few verses from Chronicles today. And so, while we hear of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the exile, we also hear how it came to an end. As we step into this new era for the church we must do so in the light of hope. Not in grumpy defeatism. Not in despairing withdrawal. But hope. *Hope*, that things will change; that God remains in charge and in control. Jeremiah tells us the exile will last 70 years - exile will not last forever. Indeed, Exile becomes for Israel a great good! In exile Israel solidifies its identity and tradition. It is in exile that the first attempts are made to gather together a set of sacred writings, that the Old Testament first takes shape. In exile the synagogue is founded. In exile Israel is finally cured of their old sin of idolatry.

Still, my brothers and sisters, the coming exile will not be easy. We must be prepared to suffer and serve in ways that we have not yet seen in our country or our lifetime. If we are willing to suffer publicly and love people quietly, we will attract to ourselves people who see past the shallowness and fraud – and violence - of our culture. We can encourage ourselves by seeing how faithful Christians endured under Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. And we need to read and pray over the Bible books of Daniel and Ezekiel. And to encourage and support each other, and not just from our own tradition. New levels of co-operation and generosity of spirit will be called of us.

On this fourth Sunday of Lent the church bids us recollect our mothers. But we might also think of our Mother the Church. Saint Augustine powerfully said *the church is a whore, but she is also our Mother*. We know both, I am sure. As we farewell a sleeping and compromised Church, we must work much harder at developing friendships and supportive relationships with any believers who are prepared to suffer for Jesus. Most Christian groups draw tight lines round their distinctive *secondary* beliefs. But when we meet with Christians who have suffered the harshness of losing their job or being forced out of a church over upholding Christian beliefs, there is a spiritual unity and fellowship that transcends other matters. Such a unity must be sought, nurtured and developed. The church may well be the one of the forces pressing hard against us. But the church will also be place where we are nurtured, strengthened and protected.

My friends, it remains that the good news we confess is not just for ourselves, it is for everybody! As the Gospel today reminds us, Christ is lifted up so all may see him and live! While the experience of exile will be profoundly difficult and challenging for many of us – all of us - it also carries within it the promise of hope and restoration. The light of Christ which brings judgement and reveals our darkness is the *same light* which

brings us to life. We know that some are repelled and repulsed by this light and will reject this light. But the critical task of the church ahead is to become authentic beacons of light pointing to the Cross, and to the way ahead. Amen.