

SEEK THE GOOD

Jeremiah 29:1-14

2 Peter 3:8-14

When something goes wrong it is human nature to want to put it right. When the bosses at Northern Rock realised that they had a potential problem, they applied to the Bank of England for a loan to put things right - though it didn't. It simply alerted everyone to the fact that there was a problem, and that there is a potential problem which goes much further. The savers and investors took their own steps to make right their own parts of the potential problem, and that may have actually made it worse.

When Andrew woke me in the night this week with sore ears, I wanted to be able to do something that would take the problem right away - so that he didn't have to suffer and so that I could get back to sleep. But I couldn't.

We have seen some of the problems which the people of Judah had, with the Assyrians on their doorstep. They had the problem of how to appease their neighbours while still remaining true to God. Josiah had had his own solution to that, by imposing religious purity, but that backfired, as people tried to keep the form of the Law while still practising foreign religion and living in an ungodly way. We fast-forward the story now. The people of Judah have been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, and the bulk of them have been taken off into exile, to live in Iraq. The Babylonians were not brutal to the people they conquered, but they did like to mix up everyone who came under their empire, figuring that if nations were nicely mixed it would be harder for any one group to get enough will and strength to attempt a national come-back. And so the Jews are taken off, initially to Babylon, where some (Daniel and his friends, for instance) will stay, but thereafter to be spread through neighbouring regions.

The way they were treated might not have been brutal, by comparison with how other regimes and rulers might have gone about conquest, but nevertheless, they were exiles, taken from their homes and their land. It wasn't a happy situation.

In unhappy situations we like to put things right as soon as possible. In this case the natural instinct would be to try to get things back to how they had been, to seek a return to their land, in the shortest possible time. This is the difference between those who emigrate and those who are displaced. The Jews were displaced people, not émigrés. The temptation would be to live in little, exclusive groups, keeping themselves to themselves and having nothing to do with a people who had so humiliated them. The temptation would be never to really settle down, to live always ready for the call to be off home again. Going home would put everything right.

But the quick fix is not always God's way. Going home, going back to how things were, would not put everything right, because everything was not right in the first place. God doesn't look at time as we do. Peter tells his readers that God sees one thousand years as a day, and a day as a thousand years. This is said to people who also felt themselves to be exiles, waiting for the return of Jesus. When they said "Why doesn't he come yet?" Peter tells them that it is because of God's compassion. God doesn't want any to be lost but all to come to salvation, and if this means that those who are already his children have to feel uncomfortable and out of synch with their society for a while longer, then so be it.

We want to rush through the painful bits of life, to get to what we think of as the good times. When we think this way, if the painful bits last longer than we have hoped we can get very depressed. But God knows that he only gives us the painful bits because without them we simply can't get to that far better place which he calls

good. God knows that in this case, what the people of Judah need is not a simple elastoplast, but radical corrective surgery. It will hurt and it will take time, but nothing else can help their condition.

When we drop out of our element, the temptation is to ghetto-ise. The church is very guilty of this. When we realise that our world is not listening to us, is inclined to mock us, has discarded the Christian values on which our society was once founded, then the temptation for the church is to turn inward, looking only to its own. The temptation is to ignore the world unless they want to conform and become like us, or to spend much time condemning, giving the impression of smugness. And so the church and society become ever further apart, each disdaining the other.

But Jeremiah asks the people to go against this natural inclination. They are not to live as refugees, as people always looking for a way back. They are to settle down in the places they end up. Settle down, marry, have children, bring them up, arrange marriages for them. They are to plant gardens. You only plant gardens where you plan to be for some time. A garden takes some years to grow and mature and fully repay your labour. They are also to seek the welfare of the city where they are - because God says he has placed them there.

When we find ourselves in an exile, whether physical or spiritual, it is tempting to think that it's because God has somehow got it wrong, or has turned his back on us. But Jeremiah wants the people to know that they aren't in Babylon by some misfortune or mistake. God has placed them there, and so they should serve God by seeking the welfare of their new neighbours. One of the distinctive things about people who worship God should always be that they care for others - even when the others are their captors.

Jeremiah tells the captives how long their exile will last - 70 years. There's no point in putting life on hold for that long.

What we haven't read, but you can, for yourselves, is how, even as he warned them that exile would come if they did not turn to God from their hearts, Jeremiah has constantly been telling the people not to fight for their independence at all costs. He has always maintained that it would be worse for God's people to cease to be God's than to go into exile. Now they are in exile, he wants them to find ways to learn from the event. He wants them to realise, as they have not before, that being God's people is about more than a geographical location, or about a set of sacrificial rituals. It is about accepting God's will and living in God's way, no matter what.

What has all this to say to the Church of today? It has different things to say in different parts of the world. For instance there are now almost no Iraqi or Palestinian Christians in their homelands. To keep the faith and save their lives they have had to move into exile; they have decided that exile is preferable than ceasing to follow Christ. Did they want to go, to leave the places where their families have lived for hundreds of years? No. Do they feel regret and all the accompanying miseries of exile? Yes. But they want to be able to live as followers of Christ without danger. That is a challenge to us. If it came to that, would we do the same? Would we give up home or job to stay loyal to our Lord?

If it is better to go into exile than cease to be God's people, what has that to say to us, the church in our own land? Jeremiah says that it is better to be faithful in exile than unfaithful at home. So it is better that we lose our civil position and remain uncompromisingly uncompromised as Christ's followers. The church used to speak and everyone appeared to listen. The church used to have an entry into every home. This is no longer the case. Someone recently expressed amazement to me that there might be funerals and the minister not invited to take them, but people would make

other arrangements. But that's how it is. The church has lost some of the role in society she used to have. But it is better to accept that and remain true to Christ, than to compromise who and what we are to gain approval in the laissez fair of national life. It is better that the Church does not go along with some of the excesses of political correctness, if it means that truth cannot be told. It is better, for instance, that the Church insist that for some positions in our offices, we really have to employ practicing Christians, even if we miss out on Government grants if we do so. It is better that although we meet those of different belief with compassion and love, we do not cease to be clear that we believe in Jesus as God's Son, who came to forgive our sins and call us to live as God's children, now and forever. If we do that, then we can still remain pastors for the people among whom we live. People in distress, in crisis, will turn to those who they see to be rooted unwaveringly. It is better that we retain our pastoral role - the whole church, not just the minister - at the expense of a civil role the church used to play.

Seek the good of the city, said Jeremiah, and our call too is to seek the good of the society in which we find ourselves. Our task is to care for the individual and seek to guide the structures, and this we can do without in the least compromising the faith in Christ which distinguishes us. More, to seek the good of others is one of the distinguishing marks of those who follow Christ. We may not feel at home always in the society which has developed in our land, we may wish to be somewhere else in geography or in history. But we can seek the good of our parish, our neighbours and our nation.