

## Prayer of Illumination

O God, open our hearts and minds  
by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
that as the Scriptures are read  
and your Word is proclaimed,  
we may hear what you are saying to us today. **Amen.**

**Readings:** Jeremiah 29:1-7  
Luke 17:11-19

## Sermon – Living in Exile

The OT reading today is referred to as the letter to the exiles and it is important because it outlines how the exiles were supposed to live in another land and still praise God.

A couple of weeks ago in the evening service we watched a video that showed the catholic bishop Oscar Romero in his stand against oppression.

The film outlined quite vividly the point at which Oscar Romero was compelled to speak by God and could no longer hold back.

This issue of speaking with Gods authority confronts us today in the reading form Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was proclaiming the Lords word to the people and it was not a happy word.

He was suggesting that the babylonian exile was going to a last longer than the current generation would live.

In contrast other prophets were pronouncing rebellion against the babylonian people and a quick return to Jerusalem.

One word sounded a lot more appealing than the other.

As a result Jeremiah was accused of being wrong and threatened with punishment.

We know however from our reading that Jeremiah turned out to be right and the exiles in Babylon were faced with living in a strange land.

God's word to Jeremiah was so different to the expectations of the people

This word from God was an exceptional departure from how they had understood their worshipping life to be.

Jeremiah's word brought a tension in terms of old vs new understandings of how God worked.

Everything before had been centred around Jerusalem and the temple and now they were thrust into an enemy land with no hope of return in their lifetime.

Yet it was God's will that they were not just to endure the exile but actively seek the welfare of babylon where they had been sent.

verse seven reads: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

“Jeremiah was instructing the Jewish exiles to engage in intercessory prayer for their enemies and work for their well being.

Wow what a hard thing to hear when you are in a captive land and angry about losing your homeland.

The Jewish people must have been shocked as they now had to see Babylon as their primary place of nurture.

They were being called to be God’s people amongst and also too the Babylonians

They were no longer a fully set apart people.

Gods grace has now been extended through Israel to the Babylonians

This message underscores that God is the God of all people—Jew and Gentile.

No single racial or ethnic group; no one nation can have a monopoly on the God of all creation.

Exile in the book of Jeremiah was dislocation from home, to be among strangers or enemies, to have no roots or no sense of story

A scary time for the exiled Jews who had founded so much of their story in their sense of place both geographically and in history as God’s favoured people.

Exile implies an alienation

And yet these exiles who are in a land of alienation are

being called by God to embrace and seek the welfare of that very land.

Interestingly psalm 137 of which I originally learned from Boney M rather than the bible shares the words “How can we sing the Lord’s songs in a foreign land?”

These are not words of embrace and peace but ones of lament and curse.

This psalm helpfully exposes the tension we can feel between Gods will and our own human responses to situations of exile.

Imagine the change required from the Jewish people to live with and seek the welfare of their conquerers the Babylonians

So how did they do it?

In essence they were not called to change **who** they were but **where** they were.

Jeremiah's word called them to a sense of normality in that they had to get on with their lives.

There are three key words in the passage,

Marry, build, pray.

All three things were life giving actions.

Marry - grow and increase their families

Build - create homes for living in

Pray - God is still present and near

in other words they were not to cease being God’s people just because they lived somewhere different

Then after these things comes the big one

seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Welfare translates as Shalom

Shalom as peace.

This was the biggest change required

That they moved from being a people set apart to a people concerned with the peace of those around them - their very enemies.

For me this highlights so effectively God’s call for us to be a reconciling people.

Again however we are recalled to the tension present in the words of Psalm 137

“How can we sing the Lord’s songs in a foreign land?” the Psalmist asks.

Theologian John Howard Yoder responds “Painful as the question is,” Yoder responded, “that is what the Jews learned to do, and do well.”

Exile marked a new beginning in the history of God’s people.

It is in Exile that Jeremiah’s word is a call to a new thing, a new way of being God’s people.

A way of reconciliation.

A way that is fulfilled in the reconciling act of Jesus Christ.

God’s plan of reconciliation calls us from our suffering into a way forward in love and trust and forgiveness.

### **So what does Exile mean for us today?**

If Alienation is one of the key characters of Exile

then struggles or tragedies that trigger a sense of loss or disconnection can be seen for us as personal times of Exile

Or from a community perspective

understanding that the Church is no longer a central player in the politics of the world is in a sense an exile from a position of worldly power

And what are our responses to that?

How do we climb out of our personal struggles?

or see hope that the Church can speak meaningfully into our communities and world?

Sometimes we all feel alienated and don't know how to get connected again.

We often lament that the Church is seen as distant and obsolete by those outside our Church communities.

Helpful answers from Jeremiah in both circumstances can be found in the two things we mentioned previously

Firstly - build, marry and pray - Don't give up on the relational life giving things we as humans do and don't forget that God is always with us

And secondly - seek the welfare of those around us acknowledging that in their peace we find God's peace.

We must be careful however that seeking the welfare of others is an authentic working out of our Worship of God

not a simple carrying out of works with no grounding in our worship.

This is not saying that helping someone in and of itself is not a good thing.

In our reading from Luke this morning we hear of the ten lepers who have been healed by Jesus.

And yet only one returned to praise and thank Jesus

The the other nine were still healed, there physical welfare was restored.

The difference is that like the one leper that returned, the people of God are aware of a new reality

Aware of the God who called us to be peace makers.

And it is in this context that we praise and thank God for his continued help in Christ and through the Holy Spirit

We are aware that it is the mission of God that fills us and empowers our efforts

And we therefore acknowledge that as our starting point.

I recently led a schools service that wanted to focus on all the good work that the students had done on various local and overseas aid projects.

Indeed I was impressed by the range and diversity of all the projects.

But in the enthusiasm to share and celebrate the successes of their work they almost forgot to acknowledge why they did it.

It was close to becoming a big pat on the back to themselves for themselves

Jeremiah suggests an authentic seeking of the welfare of others is a consequence of a calling and relationship with God.

The welfare itself is not the starting point.

The starting point is that it is God's will that we are a people that seek welfare, peace and reconciliation.

There is something bigger than us that calls us to this service, because if it were left to us we would always fall short.

In Christ we are held accountable and empowered to seek the welfare of the people we are amongst

In Christ we are authentically involved in reconciliation.

As some of you are aware I recently attended the national general assembly of our Church

at that assembly our past moderator spoke of the importance of the sacrament of communion in reconciliation

He said

"This is what Paul declares for us to proclaim in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit - Reconciliation of person, community and creation.

It is the sacrament of Communion that unifies the community of faith but also calls out to reconcile us to neighbour, enemy and stranger"

In Communion we find strength in Christ to reconcile the tension between our feelings of hurt and God's feelings of love for those around us.

Communion repeatedly urges us to live out Jeremiah's call to reconciliation with those who we live, whoever, wherever, they may be

Communion can also be understood as mission in that it calls the body of Christ to unity on a cosmic scale.

It carries us forward and outward to the people around us and refuses to let us stay isolated within our own exile.

To be in exile implies an alienation, from land, from family, from friends, from home.

It seems to me that God's Reconciliation heals all alienation

In times of exile we are called to seek the welfare or shalom of those around us.

Stan Wilson a mississippi baptist pastor summed it up well when he said.

Change one word in Jeremiah's charge, and it becomes a very real challenge for my congregation: 'Seek the shalom of the *neighborhood* where I have sent you. . . . and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.'

Think about that this week,

How do we seek the Shalom of our neighbourhood?

Praise be to God.