

Grace Lutheran Community, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 2019, (Proper 23C)

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This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

*Jeremiah 23: 4, 7 (NIV)*

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First man: "I proposed to a girl and would have married her if it hadn't been for something she said." Second man: "What was that?" First man: "No."

Although it would be nice, I don't think it's possible to live a life without some form of regret. All of us have situations and moments that we wish we could have back or do over. One person, who spoke with many people in palliative care (and wrote a book 'Regrets of the Dying') found five common themes arose:

*I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me; I wish I hadn't worked so hard; I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings;*

*I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends; I wish that I had let myself be happier.*

So many people live lives of regret. They ponder over bad decisions (finance or work decisions). They consider opportunities not taken (with study or sport or the like). They are weighed down by bad decisions of the past (such as sexual encounters, theft, etc).

But living life with a 'what if' attitude doesn't really help. Life is about 'what is', and ought not be lived with sense always of 'what if'...

In our First Reading for today the people of Israel are now in the land of exile. That which we have heard about in our First Bible readings over these past few weeks in worship has finally come to fruition. Judgment had come. The land had been levelled. People had been sent away.

For the people of Israel this was devastating. In the preaching of the prophet Isaiah (a century or so before) a message had been given which seemed to imply that Jerusalem and her people would always be safe, and that God would never send them away. But young King Josiah had got caught up in a war with Egypt and was killed when he tried to prevent Pharaoh going to the aid of the Assyrians in their stand against the rising power of Babylon. After this, the situation rapidly deteriorated. Finally, when Jehoiachin took power (in 597 BC) King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon took Jerusalem. The city was destroyed (including the temple) and officials were taken into exile.

It would be easy to understand the people then thinking ‘If only...’ or ‘What if...’ Reflecting on the sins of the past, or the apparently dim prospects for the future, it would be easy to think that they were missing out on certain things in life that had been promised to them. And in one sense, they were. They were no longer in their ‘own’ land (although, we always are to remember that the land always really belonged to God). The houses and homes they had worked hard to establish had been taken away from them. And it seemed that ‘their’ God had abandoned them.

In response to this “‘If only’/ ‘What if’ situation” false prophets came claiming that the exile would be short (that God would come again soon). Sometimes, in the “‘If only’/ ‘What if’ situations” we look for ‘easy answers’. And Jeremiah had to confront this false message. Jeremiah had to say that God’s plans were different. And so it is that Jeremiah (still in Jerusalem at this time) writes a letter on behalf of God to say where God’s plans really lie.

Jeremiah begins his letter by saying God was the One who had led them into exile. And so they now were called to embrace this ‘exile’. God was with them, and Jeremiah’s message was that it was in the exile itself that God would do His saving and re-creating work.

Jeremiah had already made this point in chapter 24 with the vision of the two baskets of figs. Jeremiah understood that the future lay not with those in Jerusalem, because they still trusted in physical things (like buildings), and were still placing their hopes in a set of beliefs about how they thought God would work that was simply not true. Jeremiah understood that the future lay with the exiles.

That’s why Jeremiah emphasised settling down in the land. That’s why Jeremiah called on the people to marry and have children. Like the command given to Adam to multiply, and like the increase of children in Egypt before the exodus the command was to multiply, to ensure a future generation would survive.

But Jeremiah went even further. In one of the most extraordinary passages in Scripture Jeremiah called on the people to pray to God for the welfare of the very people who had taken them captive and would soon destroy their homeland. And as they seek this ‘wellbeing’ (their ‘peace’ – in Hebrew ‘shalom’), they will find that they have opened themselves up to true peace, and the future that lay before them. Then they would know the real ‘riches’ that lay before them.

In other words, the people were called to live with the ‘What is’ situation rather than look to false prophets, or to become disheartened by thinking about the ‘What if’. There are times when all the old certainties are gone, when everything that we thought we were and everything that we had dreamed is gone. But the important question, then, is ‘How shall we respond?’

There are times in our lives where we may feel like we are in 'exile'. And like the Israelites in exile, some of these are of our own making. We do not listen to God, and to those who warn us of the consequences of this. Exile comes, then, from sin that shatters our lives. Exile can come from addictive behaviour that alienates us from those closest to us. Exile can come from relationship difficulties, and the loss of 'family'. Exile can come from failure to do what we know we ought. And other events may also happen.

Exile can come tragically in the death of a child, or a loved one from some disease. Exile can come simply from growing old and realizing that some things are now only in the past. Exile can come from the actions of others which are beyond our control.

These are times when all the old certainties are gone, when everything that we thought we were and everything that we had dreamed is gone. And the important question, then, is 'How shall we respond?'

In Matthew 5:44 our Lord Jesus Christ says, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.'

There are several reasons for this. First, whatever anger you may have in your heart towards what others may (or may not) have done – or to other events that are 'going on' – your heart may be open to the transforming love and peace of God. Secondly, as Jeremiah indicates, there can be times when you will know peace when your so-called 'enemy' has peace (and has finally 'settled down'). Finally, it is so often through what we do not choose in life that God brings us a deeper peace. And through death itself God has brought us ultimate peace through Jesus. Isn't that strange...? When death thought it had prospered (by killing the Lord of life) it ultimately was defeated.

Where are you seeking peace and security in your life? In our world there are many who are seeking peace-filled lives, prosperity, and 'happiness'. But so often they (and even we, ourselves) are looking in the wrong places.

God's word challenges us to think about where we believe we may find peace and security (and hope for the future) for our lives. And sometimes it is not in the places where we would choose to look. It is strange, but ultimately in 'exile' there may be 'freedom'.

Life does not need to be lived with regrets. Yes – there are times when we need to face up to our sins, and wrong actions. There are times when we need to be honest about certain choices and the effect these have had on our lives. You do need to be honest about these. But you can't wind back the clock of time. Life is to be lived in the present.

When Jeremiah urged the people to "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" God was reminding the people that in the new situation the new beginning would occur. Ultimately, our new beginning rests

in Jesus – in His death and resurrection, in His gift of life and forgiveness. God has saving plans for His people of old. He has plans for you also. Live in the present, and look forward to the future, under His grace, love, forgiveness, and blessing.

Where are you seeking peace and security in your life? Remember always the transforming cross of Jesus that has brought about the greatest change of all. In Him is life and freedom, now and always. Amen.