

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

26th November 2017

Spirit... may we be moved enough... by your word... that lies between all our own words... to hold silence to hear you... rather than ourselves... and follow that word... into the world... and speak hope... and love... and compassion... So be it... Amen...

In our family... we have a list of places in the UK we'd like to visit on holiday... It might take a few years to visit them all... but we didn't research brochures... or history books... or listened to other people... We complied it while watching Location, Location, Location... Ignoring the whole house thing... you see the area and think... Quite like that place...

Incidentally... the other programme which is particularly good for that is Antiques Roadshow... Lots of quaint villages with a disproportionate number of antique shops...

I've now given away some of our more questionable TV habits... Of course... you may all watch the same programmes... and now it is safe to admit it... but does it not annoy you... some of the expectations of those who Phil and Kirsty have to find homes for... along with the amount of money they have to spend on the purchase of a new home...

It would be quite good to do an ordinary person's version of that programme... What might Kirsty and Phil be able to do for those in the real world during the longest fall in living standards since records began... I'm not wanting to be a Jeremiah... but this week the Institute of Fiscal Studies said the budget forecasts made pretty grim reading for us all...

Perfect ground on which to introduce of Jeremiah... and given his reputation... you may have thought he'd be nodding sagely with this week's budget news... Being known as a prophet of doom... it comes as some surprise then... that this morning is he rather uncharacteristically upbeat... in his letter to the exiles... He's almost enthusiastic...

Build houses and live in them... plant gardens and eat what they produce... Take wives and have sons and daughters... multiply there, and do not decrease...

But this is more than a Jeremiah version of Kirsty and Phil conversation with some prospective house buyer who hasn't quite got all the things they wanted... This is not a sales tactic... but a theological statement about how you live in a place and time of uncertainty... where the landscape has changed... and what was once familiar is no longer... which for many of us... feels familiar perhaps... as we find ourselves in a society that has lost the identity it once had... and its institutions are no longer found to be reliable... and technology is building a kind of society that for some just passes them by...

But Jeremiah... goes on...

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...

You could hear these words of Jeremiah in two ways... one would be an instruction to assimilate... to just become like everyone else... As a church it is a fear we constantly have as we continue to seek fresh ways to engage with others... We still hold faith enough... and have enough sense of who we are as a church... to be cautious not to give away everything...

And that's right... But there is a world of difference between assimilating... and integrating... and Jeremiah... recognised the future for the Jews in that unfamiliar place... was to integrate... was to become part of the whole community... evolve into the society... for in seeking the welfare of everyone... they found their own welfare...

And it is a lesson we have been learning ourselves... I was at a church conference the other weekend... that was explaining the national church's strategic plan... how it was going to face this foreign land... of a culture that can't easily identify or find meaning in the way the church offers faith... I asked if anyone spoken to anyone outside the church... about how they saw the church and faith...

Not one person... so what the church now has is a strategic plan to keep things as they are... that is insular... that affirms all our old ideas of how to do church... and ignores Jeremiah's insight altogether...

Jeremiah... tells his people... in exile... in a foreign land... preserve your identity... while pursuing the common good of a society whose basic beliefs might be entirely different from your own... become a creative minority... so you don't just hang on... You become a group that can offer and shape something distinctive in a society...

It is what you do when you listen to others... share common ground... learn to speak the language of your neighbours... be they Babylonians or our own neighbours...

We don't let go of that distinctive strand of identity we have... If we integrate... we let ourselves and our beliefs be stretched... questioned... and ultimately transform us... for we might discover what we believe... can evolve and grow... even in exile... perhaps especially in exile...

And that is exactly what happened to the Jews in Babylon... They were that creative minority... The beliefs with which they left Jerusalem... that God only lived in the temple... had to be rethought... because the temple was destroyed... Boney M weren't around at the time but their song... by the rivers of Babylon... there we sat down... there we wept... as we remembered Zion... is Psalm 137 in the Bible... written while the Jews were in Babylon...

And so they took their stories... and their beliefs... and as they set up homes... and had families... as they integrated... they took the stories they brought with them... of Creation... and Exodus... of Abraham travelling in a foreign land... and creatively rewrote them... to made sense for them in Babylon... They took this moment in their history... to offer a new creative expression of their past*... and much of what we now call the Old Testament... was written... while they were in exile... where the community was at their most creative... and rediscovered a new relationship with God... a new way of believing that helped them make sense of where they were... when the landscape and culture was unfamiliar...

In exile they discovered they had a choice... they could assimilate... and let God go... or they could integrate... and let God grow... and Jeremiah... the prophet of doom... persuaded them of the latter... to integrate and let their faith grow... transform... evolve in this new context... as they lived as a creative minority in Babylon...

And clearly that story is not a stones throw from ourselves... As we learn to work in partnership with others around us in Bearsden... more closely with All Saints and St Andrews... working as a whole community with our Festival of Stars through December... alongside traders and schools... and explore what it means to be church... we are living in the echo of Jeremiah... evolving our beliefs and understanding of what it means to be church... in this new context as a creative minority...

Jeremiah... rather than being the prophet of doom... is in fact... one of the most hopeful and indeed practical prophets we have... Live as a creative minority... transforming both faith and society... not from the position of power the church once had... but

through seeking the welfare of the city where we have been sent... and pray to the Lord on its behalf... for in its welfare... we will find our welfare...

By our own rivers of Babylon... we perhaps might become that creative minority... that lets God grow... our faith evolve... and community transform... bringing new meaning to being church... and greater depth to our relationship with each other... and God...

* Jonathan Sacks: Erasmus Lecture 2013