

## **SERMON: Sunday – 29 January 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Family, Jesus' Way**

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Matthew 12:33-37, 46-50

There are parts of the Biblical narrative, and periods in Church history, where the overriding concern has been to keep the circle tight, protecting the faithful from those who are racially, ritually or theologically impure.

At other times the approach has been more open, recognising God's concern for all people, not just those of one nation or belief system, and challenging the faithful to venture out into the big, wide world and find, to their surprise, that God is there before them.

Both of today's Bible readings come into the second category: widening the circle of 'us'.

The prophet Jeremiah was writing from Jerusalem to his fellow countrymen and women living in exile in Babylon.

One would assume he would say things like, 'oh isn't it terrible to be forced from your own home and sent into exile, to be treated like slaves and to be far from all that you've ever known and especially from the place you knew as the centre of your worship, the dwelling place of your God. Just hang in there and it'll all work out. You'll be home as soon as you can say Jeremiah Robinson'.

But the Lord's word to Jeremiah isn't that. It doesn't at this stage give assurances that they will be returned home or that everything will be put right.

Instead, the Lord through Jeremiah encouraged them to settle down and make a life for themselves there in exile, far from home.

They were to not hold on to resentment towards their captors but to work and pray for the good of the city where they had been taken against their will.

Yes we know, looking back that after 70 years, that the exiles did return to their homeland. But the text doesn't say that at this point in the story. There were no guarantees given along those lines.

However, there is a definite note of optimism for exiles in this word of God, the God who is clearly interested in the welfare of Babylonians as well as Israelites.

Pray to the Lord for (city into which I have carried you), because if it prospers, you too will prosper (29:7).

In other words, I carried you there so it must ultimately be for your own good and for the good of all.

For if all prosper then you too will prosper.

Jeremiah, speaking for Yahweh, the God of Israel, might have been expected to tell the exiles to hold firm because one day they would be coming home. He might have urged them to create an underground resistance movement, subverting their captors at every turn. At the very least he should, like others before him (see Deut. 7:3; Ezra 9:12) have warned them of the dangers of taking foreign wives, but he does none of these things. He urges them to plan for a long-term future in this new land, to marry, have children and build settled homes for their families.

He reassures despondent exiles that God has not abandoned them, as they feared. Their capture, due, it seemed, to the aggression of a foreign king (v1) had actually been God's doing all along (v4).

This raises its own theological questions, but surely would have been of some comfort to the exiles.

This story could not be more relevant to the millions of people in the 21st century displaced from home by war, natural disaster, persecution or economic necessity. Should they keep themselves apart from their new neighbours, clinging on to the hope of return, or should they make the best of a bad situation and integrate as much as they can?

It becomes all the more complicated if children are born abroad. They will speak the new language as well as, or better than their own, and if it becomes possible, many years later, to return 'home' they may not want to go and their parents will have a hard choice to make. Nevertheless, having a family is a strong sign of hope in the future, and women and children are at the heart of it.

Centuries after Jeremiah and the Exile, Jesus, informed that his mother and brothers were waiting to speak to him outside the venue where he was addressing a large crowd, took the opportunity to introduce a new, broader concept of family, based on shared faith and not biological ties.

His abrupt dismissal of his mother and brothers sounds harsh to modern ears, and so it may have felt to them if they were within earshot of his comments to

the messenger or to the gathered crowd. It is difficult to tell without hearing his tone of voice, seeing his facial expression or knowing whether he did eventually meet his family and find out what they wanted.

One commentary wrote that, “we need to remember that ‘family’ in Jesus’ time was a very different, much broader concept than it is in western countries today. Nevertheless, his teaching was radical and went against the respect for parents that was a cornerstone of Jewish law. It challenges much of what the Church has had to say since Victorian times about ‘Christian family values’, and should make us wary of describing the church as ‘family’ if it suggests keeping ourselves to ourselves and not letting outsiders in. “

For Jesus, the Kingdom always came first. Whatever got in the way of discipleship, be it money, marriage or family responsibilities, had to be put aside for the kingdom’s sake. The people on whom he relied and to whom he felt closest were those who shared his vision, whether related to him or not.

For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother (50).

Jesus didn’t put limits on the size of the circle in which the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God lay. He didn’t have that sense of insiders and outsiders, them and us that we often have, but rather worked to include all as daughters and sons of Abraham, children of God.

Our own church history is littered with times where this was not the case. Ignoring the plank in one’s own eye in order to call out the speck in someone else’s, Church theology has at times been wrongly interpreted as the one which upholds the idea of a chosen elect and outsiders excluded.

Such a toxic theology can’t be attributed to Jesus and so we are to have nothing to do with such bad interpretation. Instead we are to look for the ways where Jesus sought to widen the circle or get rid of it altogether.

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good says to me that like the Hebrews in exile, or the refugees forced to live in a foreign land, or those who have been brought up not knowing Love Divine, its possible for all to be fruitful.

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good.

Wherever we are or wherever we’ve been, in whatever family we’ve been brought up in, in whatever circumstance, God’s reign means this good can come.

And we have a big responsibility for helping to create the conditions for that to happen.

Praying for the peace and prosperity of where we are; widening the circle of love; getting rid of any limits we might impose on who's in and who's out; erring always on the side of grace.

You're in, you're a sister, a brother; we're all loved by the one Father. We're family. We can do good together. We can be fruitful like trees. We can, as in Jeremiah's time, plant gardens and eat what they produce.

There is no doubt that there will be times when we feel exiled from God, or one another of from what was familiar in the past. And these will be times when we need the words of the prophets among us, bringing us back to what matters, the living word of God which speaks to us in the deep places of our souls.

We must pray for our cities, our towns, our villages, for peace and prosperity; for as the Lord through the prophet said, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

God wants and enables all peoples to know peace and to prosper; and for that peace and prosperity we look to Jesus, the Christ.

Let me finish with the words of a hymn written by Shirley Elena Murray, which we may sing one day but for now let it be a prayer:

Who is my mother,  
    who is my brother?  
all those who gather round Jesus Christ:  
    Spirit-blown people  
    born from the Gospel  
sit at the table, round Jesus Christ.

Differently abled,  
    differently labeled,  
widen the circle round Jesus Christ,  
    crutches and stigmas,  
    culture's enigmas,  
all come together round Jesus Christ.

Love will relate us --  
    colour or status  
can't segregate us, round Jesus Christ:  
    family failings,  
    human derailings --  
all are accepted, round Jesus Christ.

Bound by one vision,  
met for one mission  
we claim each other, round Jesus Christ:  
here is my mother,  
here is my brother,  
kindred in Spirit, through Jesus Christ.