

## A Vicar's Reflections

One of the great privileges I've discovered of the present lockdown situation has been just a little bit more time to read and reflect. I attended a leadership webinar last week, during which we were urged to diary in specific time each week to reflect on the situation we're in, recognising that if we don't, then, inevitably, other things will squeeze that precious time out of our busy schedules.

So, earlier this week, I picked up a book I'd bought some time ago in a sale, but which looked interesting. *'Dwelling in a Strange Land – Exile in the Bible and in the Church'*<sup>1</sup> was written in 2003 by John Holdsworth, an Old Testament lecturer, preacher and pastor, partly as a response to the horrors of 9/11. Archbishop Rowan Williams' endorsement at the time, 'This is Bible study as it should be done – full of learning, but also full of energy, vision, wit and challenge', also whet my appetite for what is turning out to be a fascinating read. Seventeen years later, we face a crisis of even greater proportions, and Holdsworth's reflections are as up-to-date and relevant today as they were then.

His central argument is that it was not *the Exodus* – the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt in order to enter 'The Promised Land' – but the *exile* of the people of Judah into Babylon, in two waves ten years apart, starting in 597BC, and the associated destruction of their capital, Jerusalem, which is the central driver for the writing of the Old Testament. Interestingly, he also writes: *'When Christians learn about the biblical Exile, it is my experience that they are better equipped to get on with the business of transforming the world. When people bring their own experience of exile to bear on the text, it seems that this can open up a whole new realm of understanding for them, which in turn can deepen faith and commitment. In short, the Old Testament has, for me, become a series of writings connected by the theme of exile. In turn, those writings have become a new resource for understanding both religion and the world.'*<sup>2</sup>

This all may seem very far removed from where we are presently. After all, that was 2600 years ago! Yet, what happened to the people of Judah in exile caused the sort of *'Where is God in all this?'* questions, or even, *'Where on earth is God when we really need him?'* – questions perhaps only reluctantly voiced in public before. Before this, the Israelites had assumed the mantle of 'favoured nation status' with God: this God of *theirs* who could only be worshipped on Israelite soil, and who always at hand in a tight spot. Now, as an enslaved people far from home, humiliated by their captors, & at risk of losing their distinct identity in the cultural melting pot of Babylon, they are wondering what they had really built their beliefs upon.

Yet, faced with the possibility of cultural extinction, and experiencing deep religious uncertainty, they discover new freedom in both worship and theological exploration, along with a new intimacy with God – whom it turns out is just as passionately concerned about the other nations as well. New perceptions of God gradually emerge: He is the One who created and sustains the world, who oversees history, and cares especially for the poor and marginalised. From a place of despair and humiliation, the Jewish community slowly discovers a new sense of nationhood, the possibility of a more personalised faith, and a more hope-filled assurance of God's plans their future. In time, under Ezra, and later, Nehemiah, some of them *will* return to rebuild Jerusalem, and restore Jewish worship in Judah. Yet, those who return to re-establish

---

<sup>1</sup> John Holdsworth, *Dwelling in a Strange Land – exile in the Bible and in Church* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p8

Judah will do so with a different perspective on life, on the practicalities of faith, and, importantly, on the personhood of God.

Noting the magnitude of the changes the Jews have faced in exile, and these new perspectives gained, Holdsworth suggests that these events turn out to be many things. Listing them<sup>3</sup>, he suggests that they are: *significant* (mattering 'so fundamentally that understandings of God are at stake'); *serious* (proving not to be superficial, but 'part of the destiny of a people, and the world'); *decisive* (forcing 'decisions about faith'); *theologically subversive* ('undermining what we thought we knew about God and religion'); have *creative possibility* (as 'an alternative to despair, apathy or atheism'); '*connecting history and faith* in a way that will not allow retreat into secular atheism or religious piety'. He also suggests that there is something new about the *style* in which these reflections occur: '*On the one hand it is creative, exploratory and almost mischievously innovative. But on the other it is tentative, humble, accepting the provisionality and unresolvedness of the issues with which it deals.*'<sup>4</sup>

At present, although we are not physically exiled, or have been destroyed by invasion of a foreign force (although some would deliberately utilise such language), we *are* actually experiencing something of the deep undermining of familiar life-patterns and assurances that accompanied the acute loss and subsequent exile of the Jewish community. We are also physically separated from most of those we love – although, mercifully, many of us are still managing to maintain contact by means of phone-calls or video-conferencing. Not everyone is that fortunate, however; and many of the frail, elderly residents of care homes are reported to be simply 'fading away', as they sit marooned in their rooms, denied opportunities to socialise or experience physical contact with staff or loved ones. Many thousands are dealing with the trauma of the loss of those they love (often without access to their funerals, on safety grounds), or of helplessly watching family members fighting for their lives, while desperately pleading with God for their healing. The collapse in trust towards political figures has been fuelled by the confusing mix of 'science' and 'spin', all of which seems to change weekly, leaving millions struggling to know whose advice to believe, as they try to make daily choices safely. Many wonder whether they will still have jobs to return to, or whether they will ever be able to enjoy a holiday, or leisured time with family or friends, again.

Alongside all of this, the churches lie closed and empty, with no clear sense yet of when it will prove safe to reopen them. Early in the crisis, one Canadian church's noticeboard read, '*Building closed. God making house calls*'. And, wonderfully, just as for the dispersed and desperate Jewish community in exile, so it has been for us: there *has* been a new freedom about the ways in which we congregate for worship and fellowship, and a flowering of new creativity. We have been perhaps rudely booted into the digital communications age, but have done our best to accommodate this new reality, swapping pulpits for sofas and altars for kitchen tables. There are reports of significantly larger numbers of individuals praying on their own, attending online worship services, and engaging in 'Zoom' groups of all sorts – to pray, to worship, and to share fellowship. Even 'Spring Harvest', the annual Christian Easter residential event, managed a nimble 'pivot', and delivered most of their content via You Tube. In our own parish, along with Sunday worship, reflection- and prayer groups on Zoom, we have recently celebrated VE Day with an Afternoon Tea Party in 1940s dress – by Zoom – and the first of what looks set to become popular fortnightly quiz nights – delivered in the same manner. We have established a You Tube channel, '*Hipswell*

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p39

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p39-40

*Parish Worship*, with videoed sermons, and an updated presence on the Church of England's, 'A Church Near You' website.

One of the questions which I find myself asking in all of this is *'How will our understanding and experience of God change as a result of this pandemic?'* One real ray of 'sunshine' in this parish has been a little Monday night Zoom group, called, simply, *'Meeting Up'*. Those attending are welcome to bring along a poem, a story, some Bible verses, or a prayer, and we simply see where the conversation goes. Interestingly, this has proved a lifeline for the seven or eight coming along; and we have talked at greater depth about God, life, the universe, etc, than we have ever managed before – with mutual offering of links and resources. One theme is emerging, as we share personal insights together. Several in the group have experienced, during this Covid-19 crisis, a much greater sense of God's love for them, renewed assurance of his presence and a refreshing sense of joy. One group member, who had worked in SE Asia and has Christian friends all over the world, is reporting similar stories from them. Some of our recent reflections have focussed on Julian of Norwich, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century ' anchoress' whose visions of Jesus' suffering on the Cross formed the basis of her ground-breaking book, *'Revelations of Divine Love'*. She lived through two waves of the Black Death – in which half the population of her native Norwich perished. She subsequently committed fifteen years to praying through the content of the visions received, before publishing her manuscript. Having opted for a life of self-imposed 'exile at home', she was sought out by all and sundry, for wisdom and for spiritual guidance. Despite all the challenging situations that she had lived through and witnessed, she was also convinced, in light of God's overwhelming love, revealed to her in her visions of Jesus on the cross, that, *'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'*

During this world-wide crisis, which will cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and untold suffering in other ways – physical, emotional, social and financial – God seems to be reminding us of his unreserved love for us *all*. This is not as a means of glossing over the tragedies of the present pandemic, but as a reminder to us that God will never leave us nor forsake us (Joshua 1:5), and that Jesus will be with us *always*, 'to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). As St Paul reminds us, God wants all people 'to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1Timothy 2:4). At a time of unimaginable turmoil for many, it must be a great reassurance to those who are searching that, *'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him'* (John 3:17). A significant part of our calling is to welcome those seeking God (including those now attending worship digitally), helping them discover for themselves the riches of the Father's love for them, expressed most fully in his Son, Jesus Christ.

For those of us seeking to discern God's path through all of this, there are certain things which we might do well to bear in mind. In order to get from 'A' to 'B', you have to start at 'A' – wherever 'A' is for you and your people! That requires us to have put in sufficient listening time and relational work to get a realistic sense of 'where people are'. We may think that the path is from 'A' to 'B', but then discover that it is actually 'A' to 'G', unexpectedly by way of 'E'! In our anxiety about waiting, we may create various elaborate plans for all possible eventualities – some of which may indeed be required for insurance or legal purposes. However, Jesus may just want to surprise us with something almost completely discontinuous – an outcome which leaves us excited, rather than exhausted, actually offering us that *'life in all its fullness'* (John 10:10) that we were promised at the start.

Many of our people have spoken of the disorientating mismatch between televised images of those suffering acutely in ITUs up and down the land – with daily briefings around Covid-19 deaths – and the fact

that where we live, we have, mercifully, been spared the worst effects of the virus (apart for one local care home, whose residents and staff have been affected dreadfully). The natural world is slowly recovering, released from its usual battering by traffic and industry, and the sun is shining regularly – drawing thousands to beauty spots, where amnesia sets in for many, and physical distancing is increasingly ignored.

One concern of mine is the temptation in all of this to move too quickly from *lamentation* to *celebration* – a transition which perhaps suits those less affected by the virus, but may fail to acknowledge the immensity of the trauma experienced by those who have faced it at first hand. In the Old Testament book of *Lamentations* – written probably after the return from exile – and addressing the social and geographical devastation faced by the returnees – there is what the American theologian, Walter Brueggeman, identifies as a call to become a ‘*community of honest sadness*’<sup>5</sup>. This call acknowledges the suffering of the resident community, faces the enormity of the task of rebuilding (buildings, lives and livelihoods), and recognizes that certain things have changed irrevocably, and are, therefore, lost, forever.

Part of the present conversation for us as a Church, as we contemplate the timescale and practicalities of emerging from lockdown, involves recognizing what has been lost – either temporarily or permanently; what has been gained – either simply as a contingency measure, or which needs to be adopted and developed longer term. The Rt Revd Nick Baines, Bishop of Leeds, has been encouraging parishes to engage in just such an exercise. Indeed, during a clergy Chapter meeting this morning by ‘Zoom’, attended by our own Area Bishop, The Rt Revd Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Ripon, we discussed our various personal responses to these categories. It was interesting to hear just how much innovation there has been locally during the lockdown, and what creativity has been emerging, as congregations have explored new ways of engaging with worship, with each other, and with God. Alongside the evident sadness of not being able to meet parishioners and colleagues face to face, one widely acknowledged blessing of recent weeks has been the welcome lack of racing about, as cars have lain idle and fuel bills have plummeted!

My hunch is that God has something radically wonderful that he wants to reveal to us – something which will fill us with new levels of joy and gratitude: maybe even a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on faithful, praying communities of Christians, going about their daily routines of service and attentive listening to those in need. Usually, when the Holy Spirit comes with power at times of Revival, there are associated effects on those outside the established communities of Faith – leading to thousands of conversions to Faith. Maybe, in anticipation of that, our primary task presently as Christians is to focus our attention on listening prayer and on mutual love? That is not to say that we should actively ignore the vast needs of the disadvantaged, or fail to do what we can to serve those around us who are known to us. But these *are* ‘unusual times’. Indeed, the word ‘unprecedented’ has almost been worn out! Bishop Nick reminded us recently not to ‘*waste a good crisis*’. Maybe this is indeed a once-in-an-epoch opportunity for the ‘rummage sale’, to which Phyllis Trible, the American feminist theologian, sometimes refers? Maybe there is much which God would change within the Church? Maybe we are those who are privileged to be in on the conversations which might cause those changes to come about? Maybe part of that transformation may be about gaining a greater sense of looking *outward*, recognizing how ready we have been at times to turn a blind eye to suffering, or to structural and societal evils which, for example, cause care workers to risk their lives to care for those with Covid-19 on minimum wage and without adequate PPE; or which

---

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville, Kentucky: WJK, 1997), p4

would exclude the families of lower paid immigrant hospital workers the right to reside permanently in the UK, should their work with coronavirus patients cause their deaths.

One thing which has helped me through all of this has been more time to focus attention on God. I sometimes have to remind myself to give thanks, especially for those moments when I have sensed his presence in my own life, and in the lives of those around me. It is abundantly clear that here are many uncertainties in the present situation: personally, societally, and globally. Yet one certainty remains. Jesus remains with us (Matthew 28: 20b), and within us (John 14: 18, 20), continually prompting us and encouraging us in his love.

John Holdsworth reminds us<sup>6</sup> of the Old Testament prophet Habbukuk's understanding of *Faith* as a 'relationship word', with a personal quality, like *love*, *trust* and *truth*. Thus the opposite of *Faith* is *fear*, rather than *doubt*. God is always telling his people not to fear, but to put their trust in him (Isaiah 41:10), and Jesus' call to Thomas, one week after his resurrection, is perhaps less, '*Stop doubting, and believe*' (John 20:27), and more, '*Stop your unbelieving, and believe*'. In other words, '*Don't give up on me, Thomas; just join me!*' Perhaps *that* is the gist of Jesus' call to *all* of us during this Covid -19 crisis? Maybe this *is* a vital crisis for many of us, as we choose afresh to join Jesus on whatever path he chooses to lead us?

May *our* honest engagement with God, as we try to discern the way ahead for the Church, and as we sail these uncharted seas, prove to be as open and imaginative as that of those courageous reflectors and prophets of the exile, about whom we read earlier. Their engagement, as John Holdsworth reminds us, was at once 'creative, exploratory and almost mischievously innovative', yet also, 'tentative, humble, accepting the provisionality and unresolvedness of the issues with which it deals.'<sup>7</sup>

My sense is that God's longing is for our hearts – and thus our loyalty, rather than just for our minds, and merely our consent. Ultimately, I believe faithfulness, honesty and humility sit higher on God's agenda than success, numbers or publicity. And, finally, as St Paul argued, when push comes to shove, '*these three remain: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love*' (1 Corinthians 13: 13).

**Revd Andrew Cromarty, Colburn Vicarage, 21.5.2020**

---

<sup>6</sup> John Holdsworth, *Dwelling in a Strange Land – exile in the Bible and in Church* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2003), p25

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p39-40