

## **Here we are.**

More than six hundred years before Jesus' birth, things were bad for God's people. Very bad: The city of Jerusalem had been conquered by the nation of Babylon - King Nebuchadnezzar had led his army to victory over the people of Judah, and Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem's walls and houses and taken those citizens most useful to him - craftsmen, teachers, musicians, key leaders and even the king and queen back to Babylon as slaves.

We were reminded in church last week of how bad things were for those in exile. They had lost their homes and their homelands, and they despaired for their situation.

We get a glimpse into their thoughts in Psalm 137:1-4:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land?

How could they sing the songs of the Lord, while they were slaves of the Babylonians? Surely, this wasn't what God intended for his chosen people.

And it wasn't what God intended... but it was the result of people not heeding the warnings of God's prophets, of not living the way that God wanted them to live.

Of course, those people of Judah in exile dreamed of going home, and various would-be prophets and fortune tellers told them that they would soon go home. That's what the people wanted to hear, after all, but it wasn't the truth.

Against those messages of false hope, Jeremiah, God's prophet, told them something different. It wasn't what they wanted to hear, but it was the truth. Jeremiah was left in their native land, but he wrote a letter to the people in exile – and our Old Testament reading today is part of that letter.

Jeremiah has a gloomy reputation, and throughout the book of Jeremiah, we read of his personal grief, anguish, and even anger in his doing the work of God – which he did for forty years.

In the book of Jeremiah, we see God expressing his frustration and disappointment with his people because they had wandered away from the covenant relationship that had existed since in the time of Moses. The people hadn't taken notice of God's warnings to them, and ultimately Babylon had invaded, the Temple had been destroyed, and by the time of this letter most of the survivors were in exile.

In this letter, Jeremiah tells the exiles that they must come to terms with their circumstances. In fact, in verse 10 of this chapter – just a few verses after today’s reading – Jeremiah tells them they’re going to be in Babylon for 70 years. In those later verses Jeremiah also tells them not to listen to the false prophets and fortune tellers.

Instead, the exiles had to face the reality that their generation would die in exile in Babylon. Their only hope for contributing to the future of their nation would be through their children and grandchildren.

It seemed hopeless for them. Their city had been overrun, and they’d been marched out of their homeland – the land that God had promised them. Now they were kept as slaves in a foreign country. It’s no wonder they stopped singing – it was just too hard and too hopeless. And – as we heard last week – they lamented their situation; they cried out in anguish and despair.

But the message from God to the exiles via Jeremiah, was not one of hopelessness. But neither was it what they expected:

*This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” (29:4-5)*

The first surprise to note is that Jeremiah says that it was not the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who had carried the Israelites into captivity – instead it was God! “the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile.”

And the second surprise is the instruction to settle down where they are. Build houses. Plant gardens. They’re not the things you do if you’re not going to be staying long.

So, the exiles needed to accept their exile and their slavery. And live their lives in that context. Not only by building houses and planting gardens, but as verse 6 tells us: “Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.”

The circumstances weren’t what they wanted, weren’t what they hoped for, but life would go on. And not just their own lives, but the lives of their children and grandchildren too – the life of the people as a people – goes on. Not just genetically... but in terms culture and tradition, too. God through Jeremiah was telling the people to preserve their community.

Later in this chapter, we have that most famous of quotes from the book of Jeremiah “*For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (29:11)* It’s a great verse. It’s one that is used to motivate people. To assure Christians that God has great things in store for them. But it is also often misused, and people often forget those plans God had for his people were in the context of seventy years of exile first, and then, only then, the great things.

What God says to the exiles here in the book of Jeremiah is the same as what God says to us today. God does have great plans for us. God does give us hope and a future – but those promises are not completely fulfilled yet. In the meantime, things won't be perfect and things won't go right and we will be disappointed and we will despair – just like all the other people in the world.

And speaking of all the other people in the world, Jeremiah writes: *“Also, 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.”*

Seek the peace and prosperity of those around you. Pray for those around you, because if they prosper, you will too.

Do we do that? Do modern Christians, generally, do that?

So often, modern Christians seem opposed to those around them, or disapproving of them, or at least resentful of their prosperity. But we are urged to pray for their peace and prosperity.

As God's people, we're called to seek peace wherever we are. For the people of Jeremiah's time, it was in Babylon. For us today, it is right here. Seek peace. Pray for peace. Work toward sharing the peace of God – Shalom – with all people, not just those who happen to be followers of God.

And not just seeking peace, but prosperity too. The exiles weren't to work against their captors, but to work with them, and the exiles were to be part of the prosperity of this foreign land. They were not to harm the land, but cause it to be prosperous. In essence, God called his people to bless their own enemies by doing good to them and not evil!

Does that remind you of anything? How about the sermon on the mount:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* (Matthew 5:43-48)

Echoing what Jesus would later say to his disciples, Jeremiah explains to the people that they are not to seek retaliation or revolution, or an end to exile. They are to accept where God has brought them.

In fact, Jeremiah doesn't simply say work for peace and work for prosperity, he says we must pray for them. Uphold in prayer your captors – and not just pray that they will see the error of their ways, but pray for their very prosperity.

Jesus calls us to pray for those who persecute us. We are not all that persecuted in Australia, but there are many people who regard Christians – and the organised church

generally – with derision. Certainly, the broader church’s place in our society has fallen dramatically in the fifty years. People look down on the church generally, and on churchgoers... we should pray for those people. God calls us to pray for them.

Jesus also tells us to love our enemies. How much do you think most of us love Putin? He might not have invaded Australia, but I think most of us would consider him an enemy... but do we love him? Do we pray for him? Or how about Donald Trump? Technically, an ally, I guess, even if it doesn’t seem like it. But when we are opposed to people, or to what they do or say, it’s difficult to pray for them. It’s tough.

Sometimes we think that being a Christian should make us loving and prosperous and joyful, and if our lives aren’t loving and prosperous and joyful then we must be doing something wrong.

But we are in a time when God’s plan for the world and for us is not completely fulfilled. And we aren’t always loving and prosperous and joyful – despite the sure and certain hope we have through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sometimes we are like the exiles in Babylon, sitting down by the rivers and weeping. Sometimes we are like the psalmist crying out, just as Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Sometimes it will be like that. But know, that despite what our circumstance may be, God is with us, and God does bless us. God blesses us wherever we are, although we often don’t see it. Our reading from Jeremiah talks about living as God’s people in the context of exile and slavery, but still being God’s people. We live today in a society that has mostly drifted away from acknowledging God, but we still need to be God’s people in our modern society – and to be helpful, loving and productive members of that society.

God calls us to be his people wherever we are, regardless of our circumstances, regardless of how we’re treated. Jeremiah speaks through a letter, encouraging those far away from the promised land to be faithful and trust God. God who would remember his people in exile Babylon just as he had remembered his people in slavery in Egypt. God knows where we are. Jeremiah explains how it is we can live as God’s people where we are.

And here we are. In St Ives in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I’m certain it’s a better place to be than 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Jerusalem or Babylon. But still, just like the exiles in Babylon, we think of how things have been – we look back on the good old days. But the truth is that we can’t live in the ‘good old days’, when churches were full and Sunday Schools were bursting at the seams, when we had youth ministers... and even youths to be ministered to. But here we are, and our challenge is to live and be God’s people here and now.

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes said there is a time for every purpose under heaven, sometimes it will be a time to plant, sometimes a time to uproot, sometimes it

will be a time to embrace, and sometimes a time to refrain from embracing; sometimes it will be a time to be silent, and sometimes it will be a time to speak.

But there isn't, according to the writer, a time to do nothing.

And in all of this, we might long for the past, but we should be trusting in God's faithfulness. And indeed looking to the future, with our hope in Jesus, but as we do that, we need to be taking action here and now.

That is our challenge - our challenge as individuals, but even more so, our challenge as St Ives Uniting Church - to be part of the wider community around us. Working for peace, contributing to prosperity, and at the same time to be here, sharing the good news – and the love – of Jesus now.

Amen.