

Our Old Testament Lesson is set in one of the bleakest periods in the history of the Jewish people, the period of Exile in Babylon following the conquest of Judah and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Years earlier the Northern Kingdom of Israel had suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Assyrians. That spelled the end of the Kingdom of Israel not just as a political entity but also as a nation. From then on people talk of the lost tribes of Israel with all sorts of speculation as to where they eventually ended up – including the British Israelite movement that would have us believe that the inhabitants of the British Isles constitute the lost tribe with the singing of that awful hymn Jerusalem.

But Judah was to survive the exile; the people were to return to rebuild the shattered city of Jerusalem – there was to be a new start. That start was to begin in Exile as the exiles struggled with the profound questions posed by the destruction of Jerusalem and in particular the Temple.

Where was God in all this? Had the God in whose sanctuary the Ark of the Covenant had rested in the Temple in Jerusalem himself been defeated by the gods of their conquerors? How, in the words of Psalm 137, do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Without the Temple, without the sacrificial system of that Temple, how were they to live as the People of God in Exile?

Advice, strange, troubling advice comes from Jeremiah in Jerusalem. Settle down, you are there for a long time. But not just that, 'seek the welfare of the city and pray for it; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

This is to be an era of scholarship as much of the present Old Testament Scriptures comes together in its present form. Cut off from Jerusalem and the Temple worship now centres around the Synagogue and the study of the Law.

It is this community that finds its identity in worship and in study that continues in the land of Exile and in time returns in the time of Nehemiah to the city of Jerusalem.

There is something timeless in the advice given to the exiles by Jeremiah and in the response of the exiles that is of relevance to any community of faith. A community of faith does not exist for its own sake – it must have a care and concern for the community in which it is set and contribute to the life of that community. In years gone by Christians have made their contribution in areas of social justice, in this regard we would think of figures such as Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Boenhoffer, Martin Luther King. In very dark times in their nations' histories they provided what could only be described as a moral beacon in societies that were marked by deep injustices and racial intolerance.

Such a contribution can only be made out of a strong awareness of our Christian identity, of coming together in worship, of deepening our understanding and participation in our spiritual heritage. The contribution of these three men, Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Boenhoffer, Martin Luther King to their societies had its roots in their spirituality, their understanding of the scriptures, his participation in the life and worship of the Church and their unshakeable conviction that God's will for their country was in justice for all, in reconciliation and peace.

Now we in our own day are never going to be placed in the sort of situations that Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Boenhoffer or Martin Luther King were. We are never going to have to take the same stand that they took, in the case of Boenhoffer and King at great personal loss to themselves. But we are all called to look beyond ourselves, we are all called to bring our own Christian convictions to bear on the way we conduct our business and personal lives, the way we relate to those around us and to those in need. May we in our own day and in our own circumstances work and pray for the peace and prosperity of this community in which God has placed us.