

## Renewal in Exile

Where is God, when everything on which your faith has depended,  
has been destroyed?

On 11<sup>th</sup> December 1996 something happened which has changed the way I think - about renewal, and many other aspects of the Christian Gospel. I had been invited by the then Bishop of Yei, in Southern Sudan, to bring a SOMA team to work with his clergy. At the time he was living, with many of his people, in Arua, northern Uganda, where they had been forced to take refuge because of the civil war in Sudan, which was raging in Yei, as in many other parts of that country. SOMA had never at that time worked in Southern Sudan, and we knew very little about the situation there.

I had arranged to give some follow-up talks to new Christians at Makerere University, after an evangelistic mission there - so I arranged to fly up to Arua for 24 hours to meet this Bishop and his team, to find out what he wanted us to do.

When I arrived he told me about the Sudanese people, from his Diocese and elsewhere, who had been living in refugee camps in the Arua region. Just three weeks before my visit, one of the camps had been attacked, and the people had been forced to flee again, and were camping out in the grounds of a technical institute in Arua for safety. They had been exiled twice, and had lost everything.

I told the Bishop, and those who were with him, that I had no experience of working in Sudan, and asked him what we might be able to do to assist them. What teaching could we give that might be relevant? Then one of the people there came up with a phrase which has resonated with me ever since, and formed the basis of programmes we carried out in Sudan, not only in that Diocese but over the next few years in 11 Sudanese Dioceses on the border with Uganda.

It was the phrase "Discerning the Spirit in the Midst of Chaos". When you, as a Christian, have lost everything, where is God?

I remember very little else about that brief visit. I swallowed nervously, we discussed dates for the SOMA team to come the following year, and I flew back to Kampala with my head spinning. How on earth was I going to address this topic? Over the next few weeks I realised that this must have been one of the many questions that the people of Judah, the Southern Kingdom whose capital city was Jerusalem, had asked when their land was conquered, their city and their temple destroyed, and they were carried off into exile in Babylon. So I began to reflect on what the Old Testament hints at their reactions, and what God taught them through this devastating experience.

Then something else hit me. This teaching about exile, and how we might react to it, is not just something in the past - in Old Testament times; not just something that I hoped might be relevant to the situation for many Southern Sudanese who

were far from home - it is acutely relevant for us, for Christians here and now in the West; for we too are in exile - we have lost our sense of God, and feel far away from him, and need to recognise it.

Anyway, I gradually wrote an essay on the subject, which I shared with the amazing team the Lord brought together for this mission. One of the team members, Andy Wheeler, with his remarkable gift of teaching, took the ideas in the essay, and turned them into a seminal teaching series, which "emerged" on the mission itself, night by night, as we reflected in our darkened hut in Kajiko, Southern Sudan on what had happened that day, and what should follow. The teaching is now contained in one of the SOMA teaching manuals of the same name - "Discerning the Spirit in the Midst of Chaos".

What is the teaching about? How did those Israelites react to that devastating crisis, the fall of Jerusalem? How do we react when our world has fallen apart? We sensed that there are three negative reactions - all of which are understandable - and one positive. We tried to address the reality of the negatives, and how they can be "redeemed"; and to learn from the positive, for a new way of being disciples here and now.

The first negative reaction is "God has abandoned us" - "if that is how God treats his friends, no wonder he has so few". Many lost, and lose their faith, in such situations. Many Sudanese felt abandoned by God, and by the wider Church; and wondered what sin they had committed which had brought this judgment on them. So to hear, from the Old Testament (especially Psalm 137, and Lamentations 5, for example) that this had happened to other people, and to God's special people, was powerful. We asked the Sudanese to begin to tell their stories, and in groups to write laments for themselves - which previously in their trauma they had been unable to articulate. Then Andy drew our attention to the One who more than any other felt abandoned - Jesus on the Cross - whose forsakenness led to our forgiveness and new life. Hope can come through the darkest night.

The second negative reaction is to look back in nostalgia, and wait for the time when the past can be re-created. "When this is over, we can go back and put things back how they were before". Of course, the walls of Jerusalem were later repaired, and a temple was rebuilt - but things were never the same. Some aspects of the past need to be retained, remembered, recovered - but not all. The children of Israel, the Sudanese (even more now some form of peace is there), and we ourselves need to realise that we are in a radically different situation from when this crisis occurred - and that we must look forward, not back. The past will never come again. Jerusalem will never be rebuilt as it was before. The "golden age" (if ever there was one) will never come back again. We need to form the present on God's future, not our past. As Anna Akhmatova has written (in *Poem without a Hero*):

"As the future ripens in the past,  
So the past rots in the future ..."

The third negative reaction is, in a sense, the opposite. Rather than living in the past, waiting for the time when they can return home and put things back where they were, some of the Israelites in Babylon, some of the Sudanese in Nashville, Cairo and elsewhere, and some of us take what seems to be a sensible view. We are here, and we have to adjust, and get used to it. So we become ardent citizens of our country of exile - more Babylonian than the Babylonians. We follow the customs and fashions of our new land, to enter into its culture. All of this has merit - but the danger is that we lose our roots, our distinctiveness, our faith, in the desire to fit in. (Follow the latest charismatic leader, sing the latest songs, read the latest teaching on how to succeed as a Christian ... it is tempting, but dangerous!)

All of these reactions are understandable, and we will probably experience them all at different times; but they are, I believe, not where God wants us to stay, to live, to move forward.

Through the experience of the destruction of the familiar, the judgment that preceded it and the exile that followed it, God began to speak to His people in new ways. The parts of the Old Testament which were written in the exile are probably the most powerful, the most relevant to us, of all that section of Scripture. In this short article there is not space to go into details - but what are the "headlines"?

Alongside those in Babylon who lost their faith, those who spent their time longing for the old days, and those who lost their distinctiveness, there were some who - like the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel - were open to the new things the Lord was saying through this tragedy. The Lord still speaks today - illuminating His written Word for our time. We need to attune our ears afresh to Him in prayer, with a willingness to act on what He says. Some of this will be uncomfortable, some encouraging. But it will come, to those who are willing to listen, with sharpness and freshness.

## **Judgement**

First we have to hear God's word of judgement, and receive it with repentance - which involves a deep entering into God's pain at our sin, into the tears of Jesus. It must involve also the willingness to repent on behalf of those with whom we are identified - our forebears and countrymen, who have inflicted grievous and lasting wounds on many others, but who cannot now repent themselves.

It is only *through* repentance, the prophets tell us, that the possibility of restoration can be even glimpsed. And, as Ezekiel especially makes clear, restoration and new hope will only come about through a sovereign act of God's mercy, not because we deserve it.

## **New ways of speaking universal truth - The Message**

Through the experience of exile, and through prophets who were open to Him, God revealed new insights into His character. He is universal, the Holy One, the unique Lord of all (Isaiah 44). The Messiah to come would reveal Himself as the Suffering Servant, the innocent One who would take on Himself the sin and pain of guilty people (Isaiah 53). God was going to offer a relationship with every believer (Jeremiah 31), creating within people a "new heart" (Ezekiel 36). His presence was going to give them a new sense of belonging in an alien world, not just now but for eternity.

### - New Ways of Speaking

But the crucial point is that God revealed these truths in ways very different from the often legalistic certainties of the pre-exile situation. It is clear that, in the analysis of Richard Roer, this is "for the second part of life", where we begin to move from the desire for certainty to the honesty of self-understanding. I want to note three of these new ways:

#### 1. Prophets

"Is not your word like a hammer that breaks the rock?" Jeremiah asks (23:29). In this new period, the word of God comes with new dynamic power, with dramatic force. It often involves the prophet in living testimony, or symbolic visible action, or the positive silence which comes from a willingness just to be with the traumatised, in wordless solidarity. The Word speaks in a Spirit-inspired way that is radically different (which is not to say better) than previously.

#### 2. Poets

These majestic prophets were poets, who entered with their people into the grief and sorrow of exile. They shared the sense of abandonment which only heartfelt song can tear from one's lips. Through this poetic identification, they began to realise that God would bring about a change of heart amongst His people - through a "transformed imagination, not ethical urging" (Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, p.25, quoting Paul Ricoeur). This process takes time, and it is a challenge to those who want to see results. We still wait for the answer to the question, "Where are the poets of exile in Rwanda?"

#### 3. Pray-ers

The exilic prophets discovered through prayer and worship a new depth of the majesty and holiness of God, a total experience of *presence*, of the universal One beside Whom no other spiritual beings can exist. Such worship leads to a style of prophetic intercession which enters into the dramatic warfare in the spiritual realms, in order that what is already achieved in the heavenlies can come about on earth. God is righteous, and demands holiness from us; and yet He also shares our pain and our tears.

He has acted on our behalf in Jesus Christ, who was willing totally to identify with the pain of humanity (Hebrews 4:15) in His life of humility and in His death on the Cross (Philippians 2:5-11).

### **Setting our hearts on pilgrimage**

Finally, we need to mention the "fourth way" - what I believe is the key message the Lord wants to bring to us in this situation of exile in which we find ourselves today.

#### **- Alienation and Encounter**

The first few verses of Psalm 22 reflect clearly the sense of alienation from God felt by those whose experience has been one of abandonment and loss of identity. We have to return constantly to the truth that each person is made in God's image, and is of infinite worth (being measured at the value of Jesus). The Church has to share in that affirmation, while at the same time emphasising the necessity for social and political action to change the environment in which individual freedom can be exercised.

#### **- A decision of the heart**

I believe that Christians are called to express our dual citizenship - members of God's kingdom and our human nation state - through an acceptance of pilgrimage. There are three remarkable verses in Psalm 84 (vv 5-7):

*"Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.  
As they pass through the valley of Baca,  
they make it a place of springs;  
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength,  
till each appears before God in Zion."*

I believe the Lord is calling each of us to make a decision of the heart as well as the will - "to be a pilgrim". The pilgrim has begun the journey, but knows he has not arrived. She has met with Jesus, and begun to discern the reality of forgiveness, but she knows that she is still wounded and sinful.

The pilgrim has to travel light. He knows that there are no safe places; that to stop moving is to return to the old way. He has rejected the desire for status and preferment on the way through this passing world to his home in heaven, trusting in resources beyond his own. She has learnt the purging effect of pain, the purifying effect of the desert sun, the directness of the encounter with God in the desert.

*"Going through the vale of misery, use it for a well..."* (Psalm 84:6, Book of Common Prayer). In an amazing way the pilgrim has begun to learn how to dig blessings out of the rock of hardship, by catching his or her own tears, and using them to water the desert plants.

## **The work of the Spirit in the midst of chaos**

### **- The Spirit brings order out of chaos**

**Creation** From the beginning the Holy Spirit has been involved in bringing God's order in situations of chaos (Genesis 1:1ff). When God's people lose their sense of Him, the Spirit is needed to act against this reversion into spiritual chaos (eg Jeremiah 4:22-26).

**Clarity** The Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13). He does not invent new truth, but enlightens disciples about the truth of the Word as revealed by Jesus.

**Groaning** In an amazing passage in Romans (8:18-28), Paul three times describes the work of the Holy Spirit as "groaning", as with one who is distressed. Just as Jeremiah sensed the "weeping of God", we are called to be the tears [of Jesus] for His people.

**Reproduction** God wants us to become agents of the Spirit's reproduction, without which new Christians cannot be born, or new churches formed.

### **- "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches"**

Those who are involved in renewal have a distinctive part to play in this process of cooperation with the Holy Spirit in His work within the chaos. Some guidelines:

**Word and Spirit** We should unashamedly remain Bible people, with a high view of Scripture, and respect for honest scholarship and thoughtful exposition. But we should also encourage a dynamic approach to interpretation, which links theory and practical. Sermons, unlike lectures, must always inspire the response of the heart and the mind in dedication to God.

**Symbols** We need to address the question of symbols, to clarify the distinction between the traditional symbols of the faith and the reality to which those symbols are supposed to point. These symbols include not only the visual objects associated with our faith, but the very words which we use to define our beliefs, in liturgy, creeds, and moral imperatives. We need to find the symbols, as well as the methods, which are appropriate for the presentation of the gospel in the particular culture we are addressing. We need to distinguish between symbols which are no longer helpful and those which are genuinely everlasting, whose potency needs to be re-discovered and re-emphasised. This will help us, in particular, to show care for those who love the Lord, but cannot stand church any more - what Alan Jamieson and Jenny McIntosh call "the leavers"

**Share mature models of church life and growth** In humility, churches which have learnt through experience, should share the principles of the work of the Holy Spirit, as they affect personal and corporate transformation. Worship styles which balance transcendence and immediacy are important, along with courageous experiments with patterns of worship which are not so culturally restrictive, if we are to take seriously our belief that the Gospel is for all (1 Timothy 2:4). This will have a radical impact on evangelism, politics and community issues, healing and counselling, and family matters.

We can no longer leave the running of the world to secular Governments, whose value-systems are radically non-Christian. If we are to be true followers of Jesus, who inaugurated the kingdom of God here on earth (rather than just founding a church) we are called to be transformed by the Spirit, so that in turn we can become agents of transformation - of churches, communities, nations, and the created order itself ...

This calling will not attract the large numbers who - praise God! - flock to rallies and raise their hands to Jesus. This calling will not be heard by those who want to separate Sundays from Mondays, who rejoice in the superficial certainties of some Sunday preaching, but conveniently turn a blind eye to the sacrificial implications of the Gospel in their homes, their work places, their supermarkets and their petrol stations...

The key question is whether we are willing to face the consequences of such a prophetic stand. Are we willing to face the fact that in this "exile", the result of obedience to the Gospel will be persecution - not occasional, in some countries elsewhere, where Christianity is a minority religion - but normal, ongoing, here and now.

But that, as they say, is a topic for another time.

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