**Reflection**

The verses from Isaiah Chapter 49 constitute a poem which was almost certainly composed during the period of the Babylonian exile (586-539 BC). The descriptions of the "*desolate heritages*," --- of *the people in prison or living in darkness* --- of *the journey across mountains and plains* --- are all images that need to be understood in light of the pain of the God’s people whose lives have been devastated by war and by their deportation to Babylon. Exiled in Babylon the people were surrounded by the symbols of their captors' might and, thus, by the signs of their own defeat and helplessness.

It is in response to the alienation and vulnerability of exile that Isaiah, the prophet offers the poem of Isaiah 49. In the poem, distance is overcome by intimacy and helplessness is met by the comforting presence of God. Spirits are lifted and hope is rekindled.

Many in today’s world live in exile and of them, most long to be able to return to home; most suffer the anguish of separation and succumb to periods of abject hopelessness. Thousands, perhaps millions of Palestinians are corralled into enclaves on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, forcibly separated from land and property to which they hold legitimate title. Often, they must watch as Israeli settlements are built on land, which the international community recognises as illegally occupied. Countless citizens of Syria now live in exile, some within Syria itself but unable to return to their homes. Other still occupy camps in Lebanon and Turkey -- while thousands more are spread across Europe bereft of home, family, workplace and all their possessions. The story is equally tragic for millions of Iraqis and Afghanis not to mention hundreds of ethnic groupings across the continent of Africa. War, famine, prejudice, persecution, genocide and poverty are only some of the causes. The 21st Century knows all about exile as has every century before it.

But exile is not just limited to those forcibly removed from their homes. It is perfectly possible to be living in your own home, to be able to feed, clothe and otherwise provide for yourself, to have family close by and yet to be living in exile. There are people here in East Lothian, in this village and in this community for whom that has been so ---- long before Covid 19.

Perhaps people suffering a broken relationship, estranged from parents, or spouse or children. Perhaps people exiled by loneliness, with family all dead or far away, isolated because of infirmity, mental health issues, lack of language skills, or the poison of hatred, jealously or resentment. Others still are held captive by addiction, unable to form or maintain relationships because of the grip of drugs or drink or gambling.

All these and more live in exile as do the countless thousands of others for whom life has lost its meaning and purpose; those who simply exist, struggling along day by day, yet with the knowledge deep down inside that there has to be more to life than this. Consumerism offers only short-term respite, as do holidays in the sun or the oblivion of a binge on drink or drugs. The cold reality of dawn always comes, and with it an even more acute sense of emptiness.

As the whole population of Scotland and the world suffers from the restrictions required by Covid 19 and as we enter into the sixth month of this strange new world, exile is something that, perhaps for the first time ever, most of us understand. Perhaps for the first time ever, most people realise just how difficult and painful exile is.

It is of the very essence of the nature of God that God responds to the cries of the exiled. Held captive in Egypt for generations the children of Israel found God’s saving response in the person of Moses himself released by God from the captivity of his own exile – a releaser be it noted – that came through God’s commissioning. The Babylonian exiles heard the voice of God in Isaiah, who was himself given the freedom of true life when he was inspired to offer himself to the service of God. And God’s promises were fulfilled as Babylon was overthrown, and as Israel, eventually released, returned to Jerusalem with the mission to rebuild the Temple.

Only a few centuries later, preaching and teaching, healing and befriending throughout Galilee and Judea, Jesus brought the saving power of God. The people he encountered, while living physically in the Promised land and the City of God with its restored Temple, were nonetheless far from God’s kingdom; far from the purpose which God had for their lives; far from true relationship with him.

Sadly, it was the failure of religion much more than the oppressive occupation by Rome which caused their plight. Religion had led to cultural proscriptions which isolated men and women in a host of different ways, while at the same time, offering little truly to help people avoid the pathways of sin --- which is self-imposed exile from God. Jesus came showering the grace of God upon those who lived in the exile caused by sin and the risen Christ offers that same grace to all similarly afflicted today.

In the section of the Sermon on the Mount which we read earlier Jesus affirms that divine grace. It is the love of a father for his children; it is the love of the creator for those to whom he has given life. Jesus calls upon us to trust in that grace of God and so to be freed from the worry that turns us inwards; to be freed from a life which is centrally focussed on our own needs and so, largely careless to the needs of others.

Every moment of every day, God in Christ calls draws us back from such exile, to that place which is our true home. Not a building, however beautiful it might be. Not to religion, however familiar and comfortable and beautiful it might be. No, God in Christ calls us back to his Kingdom which is true relationship with him. As individuals, both Moses and Isaiah found their release from exile in their submission to the calling of God. So, it will be today, for each and all of us. So, it will be today, for the Church. But first, we must submit, wholeheartedly to the Kingdom cause. Now is the time for God’s people to hear and to respond. Not by returning to “The Promised Land” and to the religious ways of the past, but by taking courage in both hands and living, for others, the Kingdom of God. There is always hope and hope is always God shaped.

***Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.***