

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you (into exile), and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Jer. 29:7

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St Francis would have resonated to that word from God through the prophet, Jeremiah. In a very real sense his understanding of God’s call on his life was to go into voluntary exile; in his words “to marry Lady Poverty.” He turned his back on the wealthy lifestyle and business interests of his parents to spend his life among the poor and marginalised – not that he thought there was something intrinsically valuable or honourable about being poor – far from it. He just wanted to bring the love of God which he had discovered to those who had nothing.

He wanted to live their life to demonstrate in his very being that this enriching, sustaining, relationship with the living Christ was there for them as well. And while such a radical change of lifestyle meant that, just like them, there were times when he had to beg, he insisted that those who followed him should if at all possible, work for their daily bread.

So he lived out the three traditional vows of poverty chastity and obedience, not within the protection of some cloistered monastery, but right out there among those he wished to serve.

His followers have often tended toward the more traditional understandings of religious life, as we discovered on our recent trip. Every city we visited from Rome, to Sorrento, to Venice, and all the major towns of Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Greece, had either a Franciscan monastery, a cathedral or a chapel. Mute evidence of how quickly and widely Francis and his followers had spread.

But those to whom Jeremiah was writing had been driven into exile by armed oppressors,

far, far, away from their homes, and the Temple, the very centre of their religious and cultural life.

“Come on, give us song” their captors cried “sing us one of your worship songs”

“But how can we sing the Lord’s song in this strange land” was their bitter reply

They just longed for the certainty and security of the good days of the past

The northern kingdom of Israel had been devastated by deportation to Assyria. They had been in bondage many, many years, and their land resettled with foreigners.

Then it was the turn of the southern kingdom of Judah.

In 598 BC their brightest and best were marched off from Jerusalem to Babylon and into captivity. Judah remained a rebellious vassal state with a puppet king. Nearly ten years later they were again under threat, when Jeremiah wrote his letter to the earlier exiles in Babylon, living out their lives in attitudes of defeat and despair, of hopelessness and resentment.

And two men were sent on a diplomatic mission from the King of Judah to Nebuchadnezzar, in a vain hope to avert catastrophe. It was they who carried that letter to the remaining elders, trying to hold their people true to the faith and traditions of past days.

Into that situation Jeremiah sends not just a letter of encouragement, but a word from God turning on its head all they had been taught to believe about living the faith and keeping themselves free of contamination, from the godless ways of foreigners. Back in the day they had not been allowed by their religious law to mix with, or marry such people.

Yet here is God saying, this is a different time and a different situation, so seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, and pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

‘Seeking their welfare’ was to integrate, become actively part of the community, by investing in property, building homes to live in, planting productive gardens, marrying and encouraging their sons and daughters to do the same. And why? So that their faith community and the values they lived by would not die out, but continue their positive influence in the towns and cities where they now lived. The exile was going to be long, and they were God’s investment in the future

Jesus, so many years later would speak of that as being like yeast, and like salt, additives that though small, make an essential contribution to the texture, flavour and wholesomeness, of that to which they are added. I think there is a word here for small and aging congregations like us.

It’s very easy to look back with nostalgia and perhaps regret, to days when the pews were mostly filled, when there were so many kids in the Sunday school, when we could afford a youth worker, and there were youth to work with. When the church’s voice was taken seriously. But it’s such a different world out there now, so there’s a temptation for a small church to allow a feeling of resignation to lull us into an attitude of passive acceptance.

Into that quiet anteroom to oblivion, both Jeremiah and Jesus come like a splash of wind-blown spray from a breaking wave.

“Seek their welfare!”      “Be like yeast!”

Don’t let your influence fade into obscurity! Because God is at work out there, and calls you to go, not as the great fix-it people with answers to every ill, but just as neighbours with a distinct and valuable perspective, ready to know and be known, and to work together on shaping the world closer to the Lord’s intention and desire.

Isn’t that the prayer we say every Sunday, maybe even daily?

“Your will be done” – here.

“Your kingdom come” – here

And for those who might be tempted to say “but we’re such a small church” I would encourage you to look up a Facebook page called

“New Small Church” where I read the other day \_

“Small church is not a problem to be fixed, but a life to be lived”

Small churches are uniquely placed to share gospel values and the love of Christ with a local community. Big drive-in churches have great difficulty doing that.

And another comment from last week –

Small churches are a vital component of the most powerful force for goodness the world has ever seen – the gospel of Jesus lived in and through his body, the church.

We don't need to build one more church building, gather for any more seminars or devise a new strategy in order to be ready for the greatest movement in history. Even though all of those are great.

We just need to say “yes” to Jesus.

Even Steve Taylor, Principal of Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership recently posted that “quality small church leaders are such a gift, and are the back bone of any denomination”

And for those who may be feeling that age is creeping up on them the NZ Prayer Book for Anglicans has this prayer for Thursdays

“Lord give us work till our life shall end, and life till our work is done”  
(I kind of like that)

Or listen to this promise in Psalm 92 regarding those who are “planted in the Lord” –

“they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap,”

“Mature and Marvellous” as my Good friend Jim Wallace would say.

Sometimes I think that when we are tempted to look back, and pine for the good old days, or even look over the fence to where things seem to be going better, we can overlook or take for granted what God is actually doing in and through us.

Isn't that what happened when those ten people in Luke's account that we heard earlier came across Jesus? They had suffered for years in a kind of exile occasioned by their skin condition (which may or may not have been Leprosy). The Torah banned them from worship and demanded that they separate themselves for the rest of the community – to the eyes of the Jewish faith of the day, they were unclean, and if

perchance their condition cleared up they had to go and show themselves to the priest, to be declared clean again.

Well they kept their proper distance when they called out to this itinerant healer from Galilee, and all he did was tell them to go and do what the Law required. “Go and show yourselves to the priest”

You can almost hear a muttered “yeah right!” as they departed – no special treatment, no amazing spectacle. Couldn’t he even’ve come closer and touched us?

So all but one missed what had happened among them as they walked away.

I actually have a sort of fellow-feeling with those guys. I occasionally suffer from an eczema caused by dry skin and when the itch gets beyond bearing I simply go to Dr Kate and she prescribes some cortisone cream and almost like magic, it clears up overnight.

Now of course I’m relieved, but I rather take it for granted. I certainly don’t stop by the church to say a special prayer – I don’t even stop to reflect on how fortunate I am to live at a time where what would have rendered me an untouchable in Jesus day is now known and understood and due to years of work, and research, and medical innovation, is so easily put right.

Jesus’ surprise that only one recognised what had happened and had returned to give thanks, reminds us that the so-called ‘attitude of gratitude’ is an important thing to cultivate.

But back to us in Eastbourne and what Jeremiah’s word might hold for us. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you” . . . seek the welfare of the community where you have your home.

Well when you look at the annual report which we adopted last Sunday, the wide range of activities supporting people in the community, the responses to community needs (what a well-known church consultant used to call “human hurts and hopes”), I don’t think we are doing a bad job. I think we are actually carrying out Paul’s admonition to his young friend Timothy

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed.”

I think we could give a great shout out to God for the inspiration and commitment by so many of our people to hold it together, and get it all done.

What better encouragement than the words of Paul to that small group of Christians in Ephesus –

“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, forever and ever.

And the people said? “Amen”