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Contemplation and Prophecy: Lent 4 (Jer. 29.4-14)

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How does the prophet speak? What does the prophet say?

Last week we heard the prophet Jeremiah say ‘no’ – ‘no’ to the falseness of the dominant ideology of his day (the ‘royal consciousness’ of Temple and king). We heard him say ‘no’ to the denial and numbness which masks awareness of what’s really going on in the land, his determination to speak the truth no-one really wanted to hear. We heard also the tone of the prophet’s voice when he pronounces this ‘no’ and pleads for Israel to change its ways. And we noticed that underneath frustration and even rage, ultimately Jeremiah speaks in accents of anguish and lament. Jeremiah, we saw, does not just throw verbal stones from the outside, declaiming God’s judgement from a safe distance – but he participates in the suffering of the broken world and the suffering of God.

What is there to say after that? Especially, perhaps, when the prophet turns out to be right, as Jeremiah did about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, what is there left to talk about? ‘Told you so’, seems a somewhat pointless next move. Except that that is not, after all, all that is left to say – instead, miraculously, out of nowhere, out of nothing, Jeremiah begins to speak of a new future, of hope.

Walter Brueggemann has written that this utterly surprising move, ‘the deep and raw shift from pain to possibility, from judgement to promise’ is *the* ‘central theological issue in the tradition of Jeremiah’. ‘Both aspects of God’s way with Israel, judgement

and promise', he says, 'are necessary. The connection between them, however, ... is as hidden and [mysterious] as the move from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, from death to life'.¹ This week and next, we're going to explore this shift from pain to possibility, from judgement to promise. We're going to explore what makes possible authentic prophetic hope – and what that might look like in our context.

The reading we've had from Jeremiah Chapter 29 is an extract from a letter – sent by the prophet to those who are already in exile in Babylon. The date is 598 BCE – and the slow, staged process of the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem is in motion (remember the final destruction of the city is not until eleven years later, in 587). Even at this point in Jerusalem's history, the establishment view is that, despite what has happened already, Jerusalem is safe, guaranteed by the promises of God; furthermore, the Babylonian interruption of its life is a short term aberration, after which there will be a quick return to 'normalcy'.² (A bit like climate change deniers – just a series of small weather aberrations – completely within the range of 'normal'). Against that self-serving and complacent view, Jeremiah issues a profound reality check: first, Jerusalem's well-being remains utterly conditional on its living in accordance with God's justice and mercy – unless it changes its ways, it is by no means immune from further judgement. And second, the reality of its current experience has to be reckoned with seriously, rather than passed over with easy and false assurances.

So, still trying to get the Jerusalem establishment to wake up to themselves, Jeremiah also tells the exiles that they must settle in for the long haul. Those who proclaim an easier passage home, a restoration that simply reverses like magic the current predicament, are deceivers and false prophets. Do not listen to them, says Jeremiah speaking for God, 'for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), p.152.

² Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p.229.

did not send them, says the Lord' (Jer. 29.9). And this means that the Judean exiles must begin to *live* in Babylon – not just wait things out there. They must 'build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce'. They must marry and have children, and see even the next generation born. Even more astonishingly, they are to work for the well-being of this city to which they've been exiled – understanding that their welfare and Babylon's welfare are now interdependent.

Well, what makes this anything other than a counsel of despair or resignation, at best a kind of pragmatic 'realism', at worst collaboration with an oppressive power or unchosen life circumstances? How is the response Jeremiah counsels the soil in which authentic hope and new life may flower?

Notice, first, that Jeremiah has discerned that in this particular case, Babylon is an instrument of God's judgement of Israel – that the exile is part of what God is doing in Israel's life. Because of that discernment, Jeremiah believes that to work for the welfare of Babylon is consistent with faithfulness to God. This might not be true in all cases of exile, or every time we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. The key point though is that there is something for the exiles to do and be right now, in the place they find themselves – and their accepting of this commission is necessary if they are to be open to responding to what God might be doing *now*, in *this* place. The exiles are denied, in Jeremiah's vision, a means of escaping their situation by sulking and withdrawing from life until circumstances change, exercising their right of protest against the universe. Their life must find its expression, at least for now, in a land and in circumstances they have not chosen – *this* is where God is now to be discovered by them.

So Jeremiah's counsel reflects the profound wisdom of all spiritual traditions – the recognition that any journey, including the journey from dis-integration to wholeness, must start from where we are. And the fact is, Rowan Williams has said, 'we don't want to start where we are: the legendary response to the inquiry about how to

get to wherever-it-is, “I wouldn’t start from here”, is exactly what we are feeling’.³ The exiles don’t want to be where they are and the false prophets will let them off the hook – you don’t have to start here because you don’t really have to *be* here; it’s all a mistake and you are going to be rescued. Just hold your breath a bit longer, and it will all be over.

But this is a lie – and we know it’s a lie from our own experience. When disaster strikes our lives, when communities or relationships, economic or political or eco-systems are damaged or damaging – then we do not generate something authentically new by avoiding what is so. We find new life only by telling the truth and facing reality, by living in and through the present circumstances, healing that which is untruthful, unresolved and unreconciled within and among us.

This is usually a painful and confronting, even agonising journey. But it is as he refuses to offer them false comfort, as he imagines his people learning to inhabit that difficult place, that Jeremiah receives a word of hope from God – a promise that erupts seemingly from nowhere in the middle of the text. When the time of exile is complete, says the Lord, ‘I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place ... when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me ... I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile’.

‘Prophetic spirituality’, says Brueggemann, ‘is preoccupied ... with the question: Is there a future? Can we hope and if so, on what grounds?’ And, he suggests, by contrast with the future offered by the dominant ideology through its polite prayer, denied pain, and domesticated hope, the subversive and countercultural future arises from the prophetic practice of risky prayer and acknowledged grief. Only this sequence gives rise

³ Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 2003), p.84.

to authentic possibility – because only this sequence lets the new life be given by God, not simply rehabilitated or patched up on our own.

What makes Jeremiah's words of hope, his proclamations of promise, any different from those of the false prophets? Why should we not think that these too are just evasions of the hard truths of meaningless oppression and suffering? If he just makes it up so that everyone feels better then it is evasion, denial, triumphalism. And it's the same for us. But the difference between the false prophet and the true prophet, the one who speaks lies and the one who is sent by God, is that the true prophet doesn't make it up. She discovers the promise, the word of hope, in the midst of despair – by staying close to the truth of her despair, not sugar-coating it or denying it or pretending about it. Jeremiah stays close to God when he aches and grieves, protests and rages. He refuses false consolation. And it is precisely there, that he hears against all expectation and rationality the whisper of another possibility, and the invitation to entrust himself to it.

For us, contemplative practice is our way of staying with the truth of our experience – being with it and refusing false comfort, glib assurance. It is the way we become silent enough ourselves to hear the whisper of that still, small voice, that promise of resurrection so that, as the prophet Paul would put it centuries later, we too may discover a hope against hope and beyond reason, and come to rest our whole weight on the almost in-credible promises of the God 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist'. (Rom.4.17-18). Maranatha – Come, Lord Jesus.