

Talk 3: Seek the Welfare of the City: Living as Aliens and Friends

Aliens and Strangers
Perth Diocese Clergy School, June 2017
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We've been exploring motifs of alienation and estrangement in the Scriptures in order to discern our experience of being in some sense 'marginal' in our culture. In my last talk, I focused particularly on what it means to live as aliens in the sense of being 'citizens of heaven', our identity sourced in God rather than according to the categories of this world. We reflected on St Paul's proclamation in Philippians that becoming citizens of heaven, realizing our new belonging, means embracing the cross of Christ. We explored what this might look like for us as individuals and as Christian communities.

So – imagine we're on our way with this – we're letting go our 'worldly' preoccupations and cares (some, at least), inhabiting our new identity more fully. How are we to live out this identity in the context we find ourselves? What is our relationship to this world to be? To help us engage this question, I want to turn to a biblical text that's addressed explicitly to a group of God's people in exile. It's from the book of Jeremiah, Chapter 29.

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ... It said: ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But 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. ⁸For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

10 For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and 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. (Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14)

As we heard, this passage is an extract from a letter – sent by the prophet to citizens of Jerusalem who've been taken into exile in Babylon. The date is 598 BCE and the slow process of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem is in motion. The final destruction of the city will not occur until eleven years later, in 587. Although the situation appears to be dire, the official view of the Judean establishment has been that Jerusalem itself will be safe, guaranteed by the promises of God. On this view, the Babylonian interruption of the city's life is conceived as a short term aberration, after which there will be a quick return to 'normality'.¹ (A bit like climate change deniers insisting we're undergoing just a series of small weather aberrations – with no real cause for alarm).

Against such a head-in-the-sand approach, Jeremiah issues a profound reality check: the current experience must be reckoned with, rather than minimized or denied. He tells the exiles they must settle in for the long haul. Those who proclaim an easier passage home, a restoration that simply reverses the people's 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 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. 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

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p.229.

astonishingly, they're to work for the good of this city to which they've been exiled – understanding that their welfare and Babylon's welfare are now interdependent.

I find this a richly suggestive text in our context. It imagines a way of being in religious and cultural 'exile' that goes beyond denial and resistance and makes of the experience a catalyst for deepened faithfulness and contribution. And indeed historically, it seems this period of exile was profoundly significant for the development of Judaism. It may have contributed to the emergence of the synagogue as the spiritual heart of communities, since the people had to learn how to worship without the Temple;² the text of the Torah was finally redacted in this period and deepened the identity of the Jewish people as a people; and while Temple worship had been focused on high days, in exile the people got into the habit of regular, Sabbath worship. All this laid the groundwork for the survival and continuing witness of the Jewish people during the even more challenging period of Roman occupation and diaspora.

To what extent, though, is it legitimate to draw a strong parallel between this Jewish exile and our own experience as church? To what extent is God calling us to the same kind of response? After all, a significant dis-analogy is immediately apparent. The people of Jerusalem and Judea were sent *away* from their city to a foreign land and they lived in hope of returning home. This hope was eventually realized when King Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian empire in 539 and allowed the exiles to return to their city and to rebuild the Temple. For us, by contrast, it's as if the 'city' has become 'foreign' around us and there is no 'there' to return to.

Despite this obvious dis-analogy, however, I'd like to explore what this text might have to offer for our situation. In particular, what I find powerful is the

² 'As to the origin of synagogal worship we have no direct evidence. The long accepted opinion, that it began in Babylonia, when worship at the Temple was no longer possible, is plausible, but supported only by plausibility'. Morton Smith, 'Jewish Religious Life in the Persian Period' in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, eds. W.D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein (Print edition 1984, Online version 2004, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-judaism/jewish-religious-life-in-the-persian-period/F3F90A43368992B01450605736EA0A8E>), p.258.

thought that our welfare as church may be profoundly connected to the welfare of ‘the city’, where the ‘city’ is the whole world. But I think if we’re to explore this possibility, then we need first to think a bit harder about the church’s relationship to the culture in which we find ourselves.

The Church in a Secular Age

For the Jewish exiles the Babylonians were (at least at first) the ‘enemy’ – a hostile and conquering power. It’s tempting for the church to speak of secularization in the same way – as the ‘enemy’, the unwelcome cause of our cultural displacement. Yet there are two problems with this conception. One is that it blocks a more nuanced understanding of different facets of contemporary secularism and, indeed, of the Christian roots of secularism. And second, it doesn’t help! It encourages the church to think of itself as victim, and gets in the way of our imagining a ‘future with hope’ for ourselves and others. So let me try to offer a deeper reading of secularism – and its challenge and opportunities for the church.

‘Secularization’ is a complex concept.³ In the New Testament, the word ‘saeculum’ means that which belongs to this present age.⁴ This age is contrasted with the age that is to come and so is conceived as penultimate. Nevertheless, it’s not simply to be dismissed. The institutions and powers of this age continue to play a role in the divine plan, and this world is the object and arena of the reconciling and transforming love of God. For St Paul and subsequently for St Augustine, this age exists in the charged eschatological space between Christ’s resurrection and the *parousia* when Christ will be ‘all in all’.⁵ Here and now

³ See, for example, Wayne Hudson’s comprehensive account of the varieties of conceptions of ‘the secular’ in Australia’s history in his magisterial work, *Australian Religious Thought* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2016), pp.61-62ff. See also Rowan Williams’ distinction between ‘procedural’ and ‘programmatic’ secularism in ‘Secularism, faith and freedom’ in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p.27.

⁴ Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p.14.

⁵ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, pp.14-15, 37. Markus’s discussion traces a transition in Augustine’s thinking on this matter from a triumphal proclamation of the Christian empire in the early 400s to his mature reflection in *The City of God* on the illegitimacy of identifying any earthly ‘city’ with the heavenly one.

Christians must respect this realm, yet know their ultimate allegiance lies beyond it. And it's in this context we hear Paul recommending his readers to respect the governing authorities and instructing slaves to obey their masters, while at the same time telling masters to treat slaves well, since all are answerable to the one Master – with whom, says Paul, 'there is no partiality' (Eph. 6: 4-9; Rom.13.1-7).

The concept of the 'secular' in our culture has its roots in this understanding. There's a sphere of human life that's not governed by religion, by the church – and the church allows that space to be. It doesn't seek to establish a theocracy because its true belonging is 'elsewhere'. At the same time, Christians (as well as people of other faith traditions) are to live out their lives *in* the world – to engage politically, challenge unjust structures, witness to the larger reality of God's life and so on. On this account, the secular realm is a sphere where faith and religious belonging has a role to play but doesn't define the whole territory. If this is secularity, it isn't the enemy.

What seems more problematic, however, is when this 'open' or 'procedural' secularism is displaced by what some have called 'programmatic' secularism (ideological secularism) – a secularism defined by its opposition to religion, actively hostile and seeking to exclude faith-based identity or discourse from the public realm. This aggressive secularism seems more prominent in recent times. Faced with this kind of hostility, the temptation is – yes – to feel ourselves threatened, to seek to assert our identity over against it, to fight to secure our place in the world. But this – I think – will not help and is not what the gospel calls for. We do not overcome ideological secularism by ideological religion – by falling into a discourse of 'us and them', hardening the line. In fact, I wonder if what's needed is, just as it was for the Jewish exiles in Babylon, the overcoming of the sense of enmity, the discovery of mutual belonging and the possibility of being joined together for the commonweal?

So what might this look like? How is it possible? And what difference would it make to our ministry and approach to mission?

Beyond Religion as Ideology

I spoke earlier of Christian belonging as being beyond the rival identities of different sorts of insider. It's a 'new belonging simply as a human being invited by God into intimacy with the eternal'.⁶ This new belonging is made possible through Jesus' radical subversion of the dualistic categories of this world and of his religious tradition – the categories that create insiders and outsiders, pure and impure, sacred and profane. Think of how he welcomed the excluded and the religiously unsatisfactory, of his refusal to play by the 'sacred' rules. This blurring of the boundaries proved too threatening to the authorities of his day and he was executed, on a charge of blasphemy. But with his resurrection we see God's vindication of Jesus and his way.

What's critical here is the *manner* of this vindication. When God overturned the judgement against Jesus, it wasn't just to reverse the tables – so now those who condemned Jesus are condemned instead, made to be outsiders in their turn. No – God's judgement came as an offer of peace and forgiveness, the possibility of restored relationships – for all. In other words, God doesn't simply cancel the condemnation of Jesus but totally transcends it ... with a judgement that transforms and heals. What becomes possible is a vision of human belonging – to God and one another – from which no-one need be excluded. So, writes Rowan Williams, in the resurrection God transcends the world of tit for tat, of oppressor-oppressed relations to create a new humanity, capable of other kinds of relation.⁷

It was hard for the disciples to learn this new understanding of God and of righteousness. It meant giving up a dualistic system of religious belonging that had completely structured their identities and their whole sense of 'goodness'. Think of that powerful moment for Peter when he learns in his vision of the animals that 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane' (Acts 10.19).⁸

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.32.

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised edition (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1982, 2002), p.9.

⁸ In a trance, Peter sees 'something like a large sheet' being lowered from above, and in it all kinds of animals. A voice tells him to 'kill and eat', and when Peter protests that he has never eaten anything profane or

The early Christian community had to grapple with this subversion of their old religious understanding time and again: learning to give up conceptions of ritual purity and identity in relation to circumcision, and the eating of meat sacrificed to idols.

But what they gradually came to understand was that the proclamation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the undoing of any form of belonging which works by defining itself *against* the outsider who is deemed impure, beyond the pale. There is no longer anything that is, by definition, profane or unclean, no food, no person, no nation or disease. There are instead ways of being, forms of life, that are consistent or not with God's merciful and all-embracing love for the world. True holiness, true sanctity is, on this vision, to be conformed to this hospitable and unthreatened way of being. The mission of the church is to proclaim this 'good news' about God, this subversion of condemning and dualistic sociality, so that the transformed shape of human being and community may gradually be lived into.

Well, that's the theory. *In practice*, of course, Christianity as often as not operates as just another dualistic system - with an inside and an outside, enacting condemnation and exclusion of various kinds.⁹ Too much of what gave the church influence in our Christendom-past was connected with exactly this kind of division and coercion. Think in Australia of the history of conflict between Protestants and Catholics, the distinction between the socially respectable church-goers and the disreputable remainder, and so on. We ought not to bemoan the collapse in influence of systems of religiosity that are inevitably self-serving and perpetrate violence. I would go so far as to say that the 'secular' rejection of this kind of religion is an outworking of the gospel. From a truly Christian point of view, it's to

unclean, the voice tells him that he must not call profane what God has made clean. This episode is the immediate precursor to Peter's encounter with the Gentile Cornelius and his baptism by the Holy Spirit, leading to Peter's amazed confession that: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10.34-35).

⁹ Alison, 'Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith', p.89. See also Rowan Williams, 'The Finality of Christ' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.93-106, p.102.

be welcomed – seen as part of the liberating work of the Spirit bringing to birth a universal community. Yet the mere rejection of certain kinds of religiosity is not enough. Although more aggressive forms of secularization may arise in part from ‘seeing through’ violent and oppressive religious ideologies of various kinds, these are often enough in thrall to other oppressive ideologies – racism, nationalism, consumerism, individualism and the like – and itself in need of prophetic challenge.

Which brings me to us. Because, in the midst of all this, we are called to be different – ambassadors of God’s promised future, witnesses to the possibility of a radically reconciled and beloved humanity – beyond ideological secularism and ideological religion. And just as the exiles in Babylon were called to let go concern for securing their own future and be given over so that others may live, so it seems to me that this vision offers us a way forward. Our mission is not to seek to re-establish the dominant cultural position of the church, but to witness to and help realise the possibility of true peace on earth ... that is, to seek the welfare of the city, to live as aliens *and* friends. So what might this look like?

Living as Aliens and Friends

As you well know, the forms Christian ministry may take are innumerable and must be discerned in different contexts. In the last part of this talk, I want to raise what strike me as just a few potentially significant opportunities for mission and ministry.

Personal transformation

Despite all the talk of ‘secularisation’ and some loud public atheists, many people in our culture are seriously spiritually seeking. I’m sure you’ve discovered this. They realise the limits of individualism and consumerism and, often at significant points – like the birth of a child, experiences of illness or loss, and at quarter- or mid-life and in older age – they’re looking to be connected to something deeper. It’s true that ‘brand Christian’ is often not the first place people look – many of

those I come across in the Christian meditation community, for example, have come via Eastern traditions. Yet they *have* found themselves returning (or at least wanting to) to the Christian tradition or even discovering it for the first time.

What these seekers won't put up with is inauthenticity, pious words without spiritual depth or substance. As our conference blurb put it: 'We can't rely on the cultural capital we've traded on in the past'. This is a good thing. I said before, if the church is to communicate access to something living, then this faith must be alive for us – not a second-hand restatement of moral or doctrinal truths. Remember Williams' words: 'A true enterprise of evangelisation will always be a re-evangelisation of ourselves as Christians ..., a rediscovery of why our faith is different, transfiguring – a recovery of our own new humanity'.

Two things follow for the church's ministry. The first is to do with our worship and its capacity to lead people to other-centred, self-giving prayer – the prayer of Christ. All worship is supposed to bring us into this transforming dynamic. In baptism, we go under the deep waters of chaos and death, letting go of any identity and security of our own, receiving our lives as gift on the other side. In the Eucharist, we're invited to know ourselves as betrayers, and yet know also that it's precisely *as* betrayers that we're still called into friendship with Jesus and participation in the divine life. Grace is given, God is before us, and our only task is to be present as fully as we're able, open to receive.

In practice, the worship of the church is often controlling and busy – as if we're the ones trying to make it happen. And our language has gone 'dead', incapable of effecting life and hope. It's in this context, I believe, the church must rediscover its contemplative vocation. I don't mean that all parishes need to meditate or that all services need include silence (though those aren't bad ideas!). More fundamentally, though, to rediscover our contemplative vocation means daring to let God be God, to let ourselves simply be with God and enable all who come to experience, to touch into that space of encounter. This is what worship is for – it's what people are hungering for. And too often, they don't receive it when

they come – I’ve had many people tell me they go away from church angry or frustrated – at the shallowness of the preaching, the talkative-ness and disconnectedness of the liturgy, and because they felt blocked rather than enabled to meet with God. True worship enables the pilgrimage deep into the vulnerability of pure prayer. And here, we’re all changed.

Second, there’s our commitment to formation. There are tried and true ways of going about this – bible study, reading groups, community gatherings, retreats, various forms of service. In the community I lead, we also encourage formation in contemplative action, so people may engage their lives with a different quality of presence, attention and self-awareness. I want to share a little about this, but don’t hear me saying ‘every community should do this’ – there’s nothing worse than these clergy gatherings where everyone outdoes each other with their wildly successful programs ... But I do think there’s something important here for how we understand formation.

Members of Benedictus are responding to various vocations. There’s a secondary school teacher in a high needs school. Some of her students struggle with drug addiction, depression and homelessness; there’s a climate scientist, a paediatrician working with autistic children; counsellors and others who work in pastoral care and social work, government, the law, health professions and academia. When we began to ask about the mission of our community, it seemed abundantly clear that our first task was not to take these people away from their work in the world, using up their energies on some other, church sponsored project. Rather, it was to encourage and strengthen them for the work of reconciliation and healing to which they are already called, to which they’re already giving themselves.

We run facilitated reflective practice groups where people engage in a disciplined process of reflection, including theological reflection, on their experience – at work, home, wherever. What happens (over time) is that participants begin to relate to unhelpful patterns in their lives with greater

freedom. They discover more about where they're stuck, what they might need to let go or forgive, what's calling them. Not everyone who comes to Benedictus participates in this kind of structured formation. We simply offer it as one way of taking seriously that the Christian journey is one of transformation, and that the church must open the possibility of intentionally undertaking that journey in the context of our actual lives.

For me, what's most important is that this work of formation is in service of deepening *people* and their contribution as disciples of Christ in the world. It's not primarily about drawing people more fully into the institutional life of the church. By contrast, much so-called 'lay formation' focuses on just this. In my diocese, the centre for lay ministry offers programs in such things as reading the bible in church, leading the prayers, visiting the sick and having evangelising conversations. Now, it's great to empower people to participate in their ecclesial communities. But is that it? Has the church no imagination for empowering people in their vocations beyond the institution? Does it not take these vocations seriously? Or has it simply not taken the time to discern how it might serve the people as they serve the world? If we're serious about seeking the welfare of the city, then we need a much broader conception of the formation we might enable.

Common Life

Finally, I want to touch on the gift we have to offer our common life through our theological imagination. Christian faith involves seeing the world a certain way. It's an interpretation of reality. To see things this way makes possible a prophetic and creative contribution to our common life – a contribution that few others can make in the same way.

A couple of specific examples. A few years ago, following significant theological reflection on a period of chaplaincy in aged care, a fellow minister and I developed a two-day retreat on the 'vocation of ageing'. Participants (aged in their fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties) explored what it might mean to 'grow' rather than simply 'get' old and to see the process of ageing as integral to the

journey of transformation. We drew on the theological resources of our tradition – including themes of lament, forgiveness, reconciliation and blessing. The whole structure of the retreat enacted our faith in the Christ-like, paschal shape of the journey to wholeness. A significant proportion of those who attended were not confessional Christians, yet by means of these theological resources and practices they were enabled to engage and make fuller sense of their experiences of loss, diminishment and the call to bless.

A second example. Our community recently hosted a conversation called ‘Soul in the System’. This came out of listening to the experience of many who feel themselves struggling or pressured in the workplace with overwork, stress, bullying, excessive managerialism. At times the institutions people work within seem to have lost sight of their own vocations, to have ‘sold out’ in various ways. We wanted to create an opportunity for people to share their experience and begin a conversation about how we might be in such circumstances, to explore what a Christian contemplative response might have to offer for renewing ourselves and our workplaces for the sake of the commonweal.

Like I said – these are just examples – and it’s not about ever more doing. These initiatives emerged for us out of prayer and looking theologically at the world around us, seeing where people seemed to be grappling and where we thought we could participate. Different contexts call for different offerings. The point is, though, that as well as working for justice and healing in familiar ways – food banks, support for the homeless, advocacy – it seems to me that the Christian imagination can make a powerful contribution to the ‘welfare of the city’ in many more varied ways. Once we let go being so anxious about getting people to church, we find ourselves liberated to share the gifts that our faith and our tradition enable us to offer – living in the world as aliens *and* friends, after the pattern of our Master.

Conclusion

So – here we are – in times pregnant with possibility.

Jeremiah saw there was something for the exiles to do and be, in the place they found themselves; that their life must find expression, at least for now, in a land and in circumstances they had not chosen. ‘This is where we are – and God is with us. So this is where we worship, this is where we serve’.

The people of Jerusalem were in Babylon for seventy years; we too may be in for a long wait before we have a clearer, more settled sense of the future of the church in our world. Perhaps we’ll never see more clearly than we do now – once you give up being ‘of’ the world, your life is received as gift and call. And that means you’re less and less possessed of an identity you deploy or manage and have to secure, or a future you control. The task then, is to entrust ourselves and our ministries to God, given over to the risk of deep listening and availability. And this, in the end, is the ground of our hope.

“¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm... ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord.’