

Trinity College Cambridge
Remembrance Sunday, 11 November 2012

God and Israel: Israel in Exile
Isaiah 55: 6–11; Romans 11: 25–32
Luke 24: 15–26

The Right Revd Stephen Conway, Bishop of Ely

A senior fellow of the College kindly drew my attention to the significant memorials to the fallen of both World Wars in the Chapel. The names of 1,000 members of Trinity adorn the walls. This is significant because that number represents the current complement of students. That statistic provides immediate pause for reflection as we give thanks for the sacrifice of so many. When we say that we remember them, we are doing more than just noting their passing as an historical basis for mourning. Soon the Dean will read the names of a sample of those who have given their lives for our peace. We remember them as our flesh-and-blood forebears, without whose sacrifice we would not be here.

I stand before you as the Bishop of Ely, but also as a warrior of the Dinka tribe in the South Sudan. I am only a very honorary member of the tribe, based on height rather than any merit. Nonetheless, I hope that you will allow my thoughts to be elsewhere this evening, with friends in South Sudan who, having spent years in exile because of civil war, are now being displaced again by conflict with Khartoum. The Secretary of the Bishops' conference in Sudan, Bishop Andudu, is currently living in Denver, Colorado. His diocese in the Nuba Mountains has been devastated, his newly-built cathedral destroyed and his family is in Kenya. By far the majority of all refugees in the world are exiles in their own country or just across the border. This applies to refugees from the conflict in Syria and in the Congo. And exile is not just an affliction of the obviously weak and vulnerable. The Dinka form the largest and traditionally the most warlike tribe in the Sudan. They have suffered the greatest displacement. As we remember the loss of so many civilian lives in world war and holocaust, so we remember that many suffered the loss of their home and cultural identity en route to extermination and labour camps before death took them. For people clinging to life in the rubble of bombed cities in Britain and Germany and Japan, most of the markers of home were removed and the intimacy and privacy of home was wrecked as bombs turned houses inside out.

This is the context for considering some weave of the themes of remembrance and exile as we continue the series of sermons on God and Israel and this evening turn to the Exile when the whole political nation was swept into exile and slavery in Babylon for a period of about 70 years until released by King Cyrus. The prophet Ezekiel provides plenty of evidence of continuing contact between the exiles and those left still in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, there was great lament and grieving. 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion.' Jeremiah had prophesied that disaster was about to befall and he was believed. When he bought a parcel of land as a symbolic pointer to restoration,

he was considered more deranged than usual. When he prophesied that the exile would be for no longer than a lifetime, and that he wanted to remain in Jerusalem, not only was he not believed, he was dragged off to Egypt against his will. With the royal dynasty removed into exile, no one dared hope at that stage that restoration was possible. Their salvation history taught them that being slaves in exile was not by any means the last word about them; yet they feared the worst in terms of assimilation or annihilation. This remains the fear of many peoples displaced by war and geo-politics. I believe that there are now more Syrian Orthodox Christians in Scandinavia than in Syria or Turkey. As they sing ancient songs to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Aramaic they, of course, claim that these were songs which Jesus sang to his mother. This is their joy; but they weep because no one speaks their language in their homeland.

For the Israelites, however, neither assimilation nor annihilation happened. They went into the Exile as Israelites and returned as Jews. The work of Nehemiah and Ezra after the return points to a renewed sense of identity and a greater degree of apartness from the cultures around them. Exile highlighted why and how they were different and gave them a fresh insight into the determining and shaping nature of God's laws and ordinances. God had promised through Jeremiah: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' (Jeremiah 31: 33) – and all because of the deuteronomic revision of texts to reinforce the power of God's law and the force of the original covenant. Ezekiel is very concerned about all of this during the Exile and echoes Jeremiah: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 36: 26). There are other points in history where one can see that an exile was very important for shaping the world view of individuals and communities. It is not hard to see how formative imprisonment and separation can be. This year we are celebrating 350 years of the Book of Common Prayer. It would not have been ready in its corrected form in 1662, if my predecessor, Matthew Wren, had not enjoyed the benefit of incarceration in the Tower of London for nineteen years from 1641 to 1660. The authorities under the Commonwealth offered to make escape easy, but he declined. We can laugh at the Orthodox because they speak as though fourth-century theologians were in the next room and appear to have invested everything in the Sacred Liturgy. This all makes sense, however, as a distinct identity lived as an isolated minority under Islam for a thousand years, exiles in their own land. Particular monasteries carry all the memory and therefore have Serbia and Kosovo at loggerheads over where monks might live. All the battles which Serbs commemorate were terrible defeats; but when you have been internally exiled for so many generations, even defeats resonate as times when your forebears sought to throw off the yoke.

I do not say that the Jews walked fully-fledged back to the Promised Land; but they were clear that their identity had been refined by the harrowing and winnowing of the Exile. They had previously believed that the glory and name of God dwelt in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem and that, therefore, they would be wholly bereft of God's unique presence in Exile. Their discovery, however, was that the glory of God travelled into exile with them. The God who had led them through the wilderness as a pillar of cloud was the same God giving them new flesh and sinew in the Valley of Dry Bones. Exiles are defined by what it takes to survive. However, our reading from Isaiah is a powerful reminder that Exile

refined a much more universal and generous vision of salvation. There is an everlasting promise of the fruitfulness of salvation revealed in and for all creation.

Isaiah sees the fulfilment of history as a continuation of God's faithfulness. The author of the final portion of Isaiah takes up his master's prophecy and takes it further after the Exile to foretell the coronation of God as the King of Israel in the context of universal human and, indeed, cosmic significance, even though still centred on Jerusalem. A highway is being created by which all kings and peoples will come in.

My own experience of the contrasts of Emmaus supports this. One of the alleged settings for Emmaus is now the site of a crusader church now run by the same community of French Benedictines who sent us Lanfranc and Anselm. It is a place of great tranquillity. Rather unexpectedly, just up the road is another place of welcome, the Israeli Elvis Café, where the coffee is free but where you buy an Elvis mug. This one is meant to display on one's return home. I have failed in this. I do believe that both centres recommend the hospitality of the other.

The disciples on the Emmaus road were on their way into self-imposed exile. Having refused to believe Jesus when he told them of his impending death, they could not grasp the promise of his Resurrection. It took the wholly unlooked for revelation of Jesus in the breaking of the bread to jolt them into hope and promise. They went straight back to a place of danger which had now become also the place of life. What continued to nurture them was the testimony of Exilic and post-Exilic Scripture.

St Paul was the most Jewish of Jews among the followers of the Risen Christ, drenched in those Hebrew Scriptures. I have no doubt that his conversion will have had him poring over the later prophecies of Isaiah as Barnabas drew him into the Gentile mission. It is clear that for him the universal invitation to share in God's salvation is initiated by the acceptance of the Gentiles, but will only completely be fulfilled when the Jews also accept that the messiah has come. Today is a day for remembering in the sense of calling to mind all those who have suffered and do suffer as a result of war. It is also a day for remembering in the sense desiring the unity of the members of one body. The Jews emerged from the Exile with a clearer conviction that they were called into an even more distinctive vocation so that by their faithfulness humanity has hope of healing and salvation. This has proven to be a tough call, and Jews have been known to ask why God could not have chosen other people.

As Christians we, too, are called to pray for the unity of the Church, for the remembering of the Body of Christ. It can feel that we are in Exile in a secular age which has diminished our power. Yet the witness of another Exile is that we should yearn for a renewed vision of God's presence with us, for a renewed hope in the Resurrection of Christ which changes our expectations for the future and a passion and for the unity of humanity in which distinctiveness is celebrated and tribalism vanquished. The Dinka have tended to frighten their neighbours. These same neighbours are those on whom they rely for succour now that they are internally displaced persons. They are having to develop diocesan families without looking only to Dinka bishops. One said to me: "Bishop, in exile we have come to a new home as humans." Thanks be to God. AMEN.