

Blessed to be a blessing- Rachel Johnson

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Matthew 5:43-48

Have you ever been in the sort of situation Scruff was in earlier, forced to be somewhere you didn't want to be because of your behaviour? In the headteacher's office perhaps, or even in detention. Or it might have happened through no fault of your own; your parents moved house, or you had to spend time in hospital, or you've been housebound by ill health or lockdown. How does it feel when you're trapped somewhere you don't want to be and you can't see a way to live there or a way to get out of there? How do you respond?

Fiction is full of stories of people trapped or imprisoned in desperate situations. In *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean sentenced to 10 years hard labour for stealing a loaf of bread. In the *Shawshank redemption*, Andy DuFresne is sentenced to life imprisonment after being wrongly convicted of murder. In *A Gentleman in Moscow*, Count Alexander Rostov is sentenced to live out his life under house arrest in the Metropol hotel for publishing subversive poetry. And they respond with various degrees of anger, bitterness and despair. If only they had received a letter like Scruff did, full of unexpected hope and encouragement.

Jeremiah has spent years warning the Israelites to change their ways. And they've spent years ignoring him. Until finally calamity falls – they're conquered by the Babylonians and many are taken away into exile. Away from their homes, away from the temple, away from the place where God dwells with them. They lament, 'how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' And in the middle of their confusion and sorrow and guilt, they receive a letter from Jeremiah. I wonder what they expect it to say? 'I told you so, I warned you what would happen, you brought this on yourselves, you deserve it'. I wonder if they're tempted to throw it away rather than hear Jeremiah tell them off again. But it's a little piece of home and this is what it says:

A message from the Lord, the God of Israel: I know you want to go home but don't listen to false prophets saying you'll be back soon; you're going to be here for 70 years and life won't be easy. But don't despair; there is still life to be found here - you can build and grow and marry and raise children. You can be a blessing to this place and these people. Because I'm not confined to Israel, I am here with you and you are still my children, my beloved ones. And when you seek me with all your heart you will find me. When the time is right, I will fulfil the plans I have for you – plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future, plans to restore you and bring you home.

What a letter – it's like a warm hug, a dose of grace! It doesn't offer false promises or a quick solution but it offers the steadfast love of the Lord for his children and the encouragement they need to learn to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The exiles use their time in Babylon to reflect on their history and the mistakes they've made, to deepen their understanding of God, and renew their vision of what it means to be God's people in the world – a light to the gentiles, a

blessing to all nations. They write many of the Old Testament books we treasure and develop new ways of worship. But they only have the energy and motivation to do all that because they are grounded in the hope and security expressed in this letter. Perhaps they sing, as we do, 'All my hope on God is founded'.

Among the Babylonian exiles are some familiar characters – Daniel of lions' den fame, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into the fiery furnace. I wonder if they read this letter, I wonder if it helped them to navigate that tricky path – to be a blessing to Babylon but remain faithful to the Lord. I wonder if they could have imagined how much their stories of faithfulness, born out of such adversity, would bless and inspire countless people over the next 2500 years?

When we first went into lockdown 15 months ago I felt like I'd been thrust into a strange new world. Suddenly, I had too much of my family and not enough of my friends. I was spending 5 hours a day fielding phone calls from distraught parents whose antenatal classes had been moved online, trying to homeschool a scared 9 year old and get to grips with recording sermons, remembering the good old days when I could buy flour any time I wanted, wondering if it counted as stockpiling if I bought toilet rolls a week early just in case there weren't any left next week, thinking how are we meant to celebrate Easter if we can't go to church? I lamented and God answered:

This is nothing new, it's the lament of the exiles. But they learnt to sing a new song and so can you. I was with them and I'm with you. I had plans to prosper them and I have plans to prosper you too.

It was just the message of reassurance and hope I needed to see lockdown in a different way and look forward to what God would do through it. Life didn't suddenly become easy but I was able to look for where God was present. God's reassurance helped me see the joy of worshipping together as a family, the pleasure of discovering beautiful places to walk around Old Woking, the wonder of staying connected on zoom, even with my technophobe mum. Lockdown deepened our sense of community, with the link system and shop&drop. It motivated us to be more creative and inclusive in our worship. It gave us the space to reimagine our vision and try new things, like Energise, and the Connections Cafe starting up soon. It turns out that God isn't confined to the walls of our church buildings, he's at work in our homes and communities and hospitals in all sorts of ways. In a prison cell or Babylon or lockdown we are so blessed – God is still with us, still promising us a hope and a future.

We can debate how much we as a human race are responsible for this pandemic. We can talk about our misuse of nature or reckless experimentation with viruses, foolhardy decisions by politicians, complacency on the part of the general public, selfishness by first world countries. However much or little we think we're to blame, it's clear that a great many innocent people have suffered and continue to suffer, just as they did at the time of the exile. Perhaps one day the history books will look back at covid-19 and judge it by the blessings that came out of it. Perhaps it will be a wake up call for greater international cooperation, greater respect for nature, greater

investment in healthcare for the most vulnerable. Perhaps it will mark the beginning of the revival of the church. Perhaps. If we play our part.

In psalm 122 David writes, 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you prosper.' And Jeremiah writes, 'pray for the peace and prosperity of [Babylon]'. It resonates with our gospel reading: 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you....[for God] sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous'. The message here is clear – God blesses both righteous and unrighteous and we are to do the same, through our actions and in our prayers. In May 2020 Christians from across the UK recorded a song for that very purpose – to bless our nation – *The Lord bless you and keep you, may his favour be upon you and your family for a thousand generations*. You wouldn't think anyone would object to that would you? But it caused some minor controversy in Evangelical circles – was it appropriate to take a blessing spoken over God's people and apply it to pagan nations? Was the church showing the socially acceptable bits of our faith and leaving out the less popular bit – the call for repentance? Was the church, in fact, following in the footsteps of the false prophets who gave the exiles the message they wanted to hear instead of the unpalatable truth? What do you think?

'Pray for the peace and prosperity of Babylon', says Jeremiah. I wonder if Daniel prayed for Babylon during the daily prayer times that got him into so much trouble? I expect so. How often do we pray for peace in Woking, in our troubled inner cities, in our nation and the world? Do we pray for victims and persecutors alike? Do we remember there's a peace beyond an end to warfare and knife crime and playground bullying? True peace comes from God, the author of peace. True prosperity comes from giving up everything we have in exchange for Jesus. To pray for peace is to pray for our friends and our enemies to come to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, as many of us did during Thy Kingdom Come – to pray for them repent, just as our evangelical friends said. So it's good to know that online Alpha courses boomed during lockdown and huge numbers of people watched an online service or turned to prayer, including those who had never been to church before. The challenge we now face is to stay connected to these people as we move back into the offline world, to help those sparks of interest grow into a living faith. What changes are we willing to make so that we have the resources to do that? What are we willing to sacrifice so that we become a blessing to our community?

Do you remember my fictional trio, downcast and embittered at the losses they've endured and the lives they're being forced to live? Jean Valjean receives mercy at the hands of the Bishop of Digne. Andy DuFresne receives the power of hope when he finds a crumbling prison wall. Count Rostov makes a friend who helps him see the hotel with fresh eyes. Mercy, hope and vision that enable them to bless and be blessed in the most unlikely circumstances. As Rostov's friend Mishka observes to him, "Who would have imagined, when you were sentenced to life in the Metropol all those years ago, that you had just become the luckiest man in all of Russia."

I don't know if we'll ever count ourselves lucky to have lived through covid-19 but I do know that if we seek God with all our heart we will find life - in prison, in Babylon, in lockdown and in the

future. If we seek God with all our heart then he will bless us with undeserved mercy, steadfast hope and fresh vision just as he did the exiles. And God's blessing will be the foundation for us to be a blessing to the world.