

Our Spiritual “Diaspora”

“**L’Shana Haba’ah B’Yerushalayim**” (“Next year in Jerusalem”) is a phrase sung or prayed at the end of Passover and Yom Kippur which has historically expressed the desire of Jews living in dispersion outside of Israel to be able to return - a desire also for redemption, peace and perfection. My reference to this phrase will become clear (I hope) as you read on, but firstly just to say that the while the words diaspora and dispersion can be used interchangeably, historically diaspora referred to the involuntary mass dispersion of a population from its homeland and in that sense might also imply being exiled.

An example of the latter would be the episode in the Old Testament (1Kings chapters 24 & 25) when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, attacked the city of Jerusalem in 598BC, destroying the Temple and taking its treasures and the greater part of the population into exile in Babylon where they remained for next seventy years. A little later Nebuzaradan, an officer of the king of Babylon, completed the destruction of Jerusalem and carried off into exile many of those who had escaped the first deportation.

In 539BC Cyrus, king of Persia, attacked and conquered Babylon and in the book of Ezra (1 v 1-11) it says he received a message from God to release the Jewish people from their captivity and allow them to return to Jerusalem and to give them every assistance in rebuilding and refurnishing the Temple – which, at the heart of the city, was a symbol for the Jews of God’s presence with them. When the work was completed they held a lavish ceremony of rededication, offering “one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs and, as a sacrifice for sin for the whole of Israel, twelve he-goats, corresponding to the number of tribes of Israel. Then they installed the priests according to their orders in the service of the Temple of God” thus bringing to an end the years of exile during which they had been without a temple in which to worship God – understandably, therefore, an occasion for great celebration.

In the Acts of the Apostles (16 v 11-15) Paul and Timothy come across a Jewish community living in dispersion in Philippi in Macedonia (Greece) which was under Roman occupation. They had settled there after fleeing persecution in other Roman territories. It says Paul and Timothy discovered a place just outside the city walls, by the river, that had become a customary and presumably private place for the community to meet for prayer as they hadn’t been able to establish a synagogue in Philippi – an example of making the best they could of the situation they were in. Interestingly the women were further “exiled” in the sense that they weren’t allowed to join the meeting with the men and so Paul and Timothy preached to them, and as a result one of them, a woman called Lydia, was converted and baptised and her household as well –

an example of God's presence and action even in the absence of a physical place of worship.

Another example of faith growing "in dispersion" as it were would be from my experience as a lay-missionary in Zambia back in the early 1970s. The Jesuit priests I taught alongside were primarily there to operate a minor seminary, however they also had responsibility for serving a number of remote outstations which involved driving to those locations every few months, baptising, hearing confessions and celebrating open air Masses. Between such visits local catechists would provide instruction and lead prayer services, keeping the faith of the people active until the next time a priest came to celebrate Mass.

It was the sort of typical mission situation that we all imagine, and by comparison we are in a very privileged position given the number of churches that there are, sometimes within a stone's throw of one another, with (under normal circumstances) the availability of daily Mass and at least two or three Sunday Masses yet none of them filled to capacity, and a priest is always available to us anytime we phone or knock on his door.

However, the lockdown of the past several months (as I write) made necessary by the coronavirus has perhaps opened our eyes a little. For all of that time we have been in a situation of "exile" – of being physically separated from our faith community because we've been in lockdown, not able to go to church to celebrate Mass and receive holy communion because our churches had to be closed. None of us has ever experienced a situation like this before and it has been something of a challenge coming up with ways to do whatever we could to be as "un-exiled" as possible. What did the Jews in Babylon do? – probably much the same as the Jewish community in Philippi: meeting where they could and when they could, carrying out as much of their religious rites as they could, making the best they could of their situation.

We have done much the same, but in our case turning to technology in ways we have never had to do before, maintaining connections with our faith community both spiritually and socially via the internet – or at least those who were able to choose to. And those who weren't able may now have to learn how because otherwise they could be out-of-touch for even longer given that we have no idea when this situation will finally come to an end.

In fact there could well be aspects of what we've been doing out of necessity that could become the new norm. Churches that have installed internet cameras might well opt to continue using them in order to bring Mass to the sick and housebound. For logistical reasons, and certainly until a vaccine is developed, it may be necessary to extend indefinitely the suspension of the Sunday and holyday obligation and allow people to go to Mass any day during the week

instead because it will simply be impossible for many parish churches to accommodate the numbers involved at as many Sunday Masses as priests could reasonably be expected to celebrate. And even if we can find ways of safely accommodating a limited congregation, for the foreseeable future we may not be able to use hymn books (for health and safety reasons) and holy water stoups, or receive communion from the chalice, and keep our celebrations (and therefore the time we are together indoors even socially distanced) as short as possible.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God gave a message to his people being carried off into exile in Babylon. The following is taken from that message and I think we will recognize in it aspects of our own state of exile and therefore what God may be saying to us:

Work for the good of the country to which I have exiled you, since on its welfare yours depends. When the seventy years are over will I visit you and fulfil my promise in your favour by bringing you back to this place. I know the plans I have in mind for you – it is the Lord who speaks – plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you. Then when you call to me, and come to plead with me, I will listen to you. When you seek me you shall find me, when you seek me with all your heart; I will let you find me – it is the Lord who speaks. I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have dispersed you – it is the Lord who speaks. I will bring you back to the place from which I exiled you. (from Jeremiah 29 v 4-14)

Meanwhile, as long as we are in this situation of “diaspora”, we might keep in mind some further words of hope, those we started with - but in this case not “next year in Jerusalem” but “next month in church”.

* * *