

We are all responsible to make our community prosper

Like locusts the enemy devoured the land. The year was 587 B.C. King Zedekiah of Judah revolted against the mighty Babylonian empire. He reneged on the tributes Judah had been paying since it was colonised.

Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar retributed swiftly and viciously. Babylonian troops reduced Jerusalem and Judah to ruin. They killed indiscriminately, ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple of God. Nebuchadnezzar had the sons of king Zedekiah executed in front of him. The king was then blinded and exiled with other prominent citizens to Babylonia.

What were the Jewish captives to make of the grievous humiliation?

Totally disoriented, grieving and aching, they cried out to God. "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion," laments the familiar Psalm 137 about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Then God spoke.

God commanded the prophet Jeremiah to send a letter to the Babylonian captives (Jeremiah 29). God tells the disrupted and destitute captives to build houses and live in them, to marry and have children, to multiply and to work towards the benefit of society.

God says: "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" (Jeremiah 29:7).

"For 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."

God's letter to the uprooted remnant of Judah speaks to us today.

We too are a disrupted and disoriented society. Perhaps we all feel like exiles, strangers, in our own land. It seems the crooked and corrupted took control of our country. The economic growth associated with the first decade of democracy is a distant memory. The joy and hope of 1994 is long gone.

Many feel alienated from society.

Imagine yourself as an unemployed young adult in our metro. The education system has failed you. You are desperate to carve out a meaningful future for yourself and your family.

Or you may be extremely poor, without a proper education and longing for the necessities of a dignified life, dreaming about a better future for yourself and your loved ones.

You may be in business, an employer with people working for you, struggling to make ends meet in an environment of dismal economic growth. You are responsible for those you employ.

Or you may be a pensioner who worked hard all your life, but the escalating cost of living is reducing you to poverty.

Seemingly only crime and corruption pay.

Fight or flight responses take over in these situations. Some want to overthrow the system and are easily radicalised. Others flee or are forced to seek employment in other countries.

What is God's message at a time like this?

Firstly, God teaches us in Jeremiah 29 we are all responsible for our communal welfare, progress and prosperity. We are together in this mess, and we need to work together to get out of it. Blaming and division are destructive. Cooperation is fruitful.

The Jewish remnant in captivity probably prayed for God's judgment on their enemies. They hated every moment of their exile, mourned about their terrible losses, and longed to return home.

God insisted that they take responsibility for the society they were part of. They had no power and could do very little. But they had to cooperate, even with their captors, to build society. They had to take responsibility.

Jeremiah's letter underlines their collective socio-economic calling. Through building, marrying and procreating they had to seek the benefit of Babylon. Without losing their spiritual identity, they had to become economically active and take part in the flourishing of the whole of society.

One can selfishly seek only your own benefit. But, God calls us to serve the bigger whole, to contribute, to strive for the flourishing of everyone.

Secondly, Jeremiah's letter points to God's action in society. God judges corruption and blesses honest service and hard work.

The exile was God's judgment on the crime and corruption of the Judeans. God gave them plenty, but they became corrupted and crooked. The leaders set a terrible example.

Prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah warned against injustice. The prophet Amos names these sins as economic exploitation, corruption, unfair trade practices, the abuse of judicial processes and disregard for the interest of others.

God does not sleep. God resists the unjust and the corrupt.

We need courage to do whatever we can to serve the other and to build a responsible society.

Let us plan together, in formal or informal circles, what we can do to improve our society. Options abound. In serving others' interest, we will find our welfare.

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