

HOME

SERMON AT HOME in BABYLON AN 'OIKOS' FOR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES

There is an optional PowerPoint presentation which can be downloaded and used to accompany this sermon entitled "Home – Sermon PowerPoint".

Jeremiah 29:4-11

⁴This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' ⁸Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord. ¹⁰This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

AT HOME IN BABYLON

Recently I preached at a service for a group of five local churches which work together. Between them, the churches are spread across the overcrowded, multiracial suburb where I live. The church buildings vary from a multipurpose brick hall overlooked by tower-blocks to a beautiful ancient stone building next to a village green in what's left of the original village now swallowed by London. The congregations vary too – all are multiracial, with the largest communities from India, the Caribbean, West Africa, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and England, and with traditions of worship that cover the spectrum from neo-Pentecostal to Anglo-Catholic to low-church Evangelical.

I asked this very diverse group of Christians a simple question: "Where is your home?" The responses were revealing and fascinating:

- "My home is in the Punjab / Grenada / Poland / Sri Lanka / Wales ..." (some of those who said these have lived in London for 40+ years)
- "This is my home. I've always lived here."
- "I've made my home here. This is now my home."
- "Home is my house. When I shut the door and put on my slippers, I'm at home."
- "Home is wherever my family and friends are."



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- “My home is in heaven.”
- “Home is anywhere I stay for a night!”
- “I have more than one home – anywhere I’ve lived and left people I love is, in some sense, my home.”

None of these answers are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. However, they reveal both the complexity of our feelings about ‘home’ and the way things have changed in the past century. Today, we live in an era of unprecedented mobility. Globally, people move home far more than in any previous generation. Whereas many of us may have had grandparents who never moved, and sometimes never travelled more than a few miles from where they were born, today most of us will have moved house several times.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winning author and Holocaust survivor asked, “*Isn’t the twentieth century the age of the expatriate, the refugee, the stateless and the wanderer?*”¹ And yet the twenty-first century is even more so. Although future trends are very difficult to predict, experts suggest that by 2050 as many as 150 million people may be displaced by a changing climate². No wonder a philosopher has said “*The world is nothing but a scene of endless displacement.*” The global village has become “*a placeless place.*”³

The reasons people are moving so much today are numerous but the biggest four are:

- Education – our modern education system tends to encourage a sense of restless discontent – that the grass is always greener and the opportunities more fruitful elsewhere;
- Money – people are driven by economic forces to move to look for work, to keep their jobs, or to gain promotion;
- Conflict – people move to avoid war or persecution; and finally,
- Environmental – people move because crops fail, sea-levels rise, deserts encroach, and erosion or deforestation destroy once-good land;

The eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has spoken of today’s world as increasingly populated by two groups of dislocated, restless people: “*tourists*” and “*vagabonds*”⁴. Tourists are those for whom easy cheap travel has made the whole world a shopping centre of instant consumer gratification and pleasure-seeking. Vagabonds, in contrast, are those who are trapped in poverty and forced to move by catastrophic economic, social and environmental changes. Both groups are in an important sense ‘homeless’ – less and less

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Longing for Home*, in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *The Longing for Home*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, p.19.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/nov/03/global-warming-climate-refugees>

³ E. S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p.xiii

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: the Human Consequences*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

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rooted in a particular place, a community, an ecosystem, and as a result both tourists and vagabonds have a damaging effect socially and environmentally.

So, for Christians, what does God's Word have to say to this situation? Should we be concerned about this epidemic of rootlessness and hyper-mobility, or do we simply say, in the words of the old American spiritual?

“This earth is not my home; I'm just a-passing through,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue ...
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.”

One biblical passage that addresses this issue directly is Jeremiah 29:4-11. The context is of a people who have been uprooted, displaced, and forced to migrate against their will. They are God's chosen people and their whole identity was based around a Promised Land – a place God had given them on trust to thrive and flourish. Yet, here they as exiles in Babylon – forced as victims of war to move to a foreign land, with food, language, culture and religion that was alien to them. Not surprisingly, their plea to God, and to their leaders in exile, was to return home as soon as possible. Elsewhere, the Psalms record their lament: “How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:4).

God's word to his people through Jeremiah is therefore surprising and shocking.

- The people thought they were only in exile because God had abandoned them to their enemies, but God says “I carried you into exile” (v.4). God was working out his purposes through their enemies, through the hardship of war, forced migration, and being dumped in a place they had not chosen.
- Moreover, instead of saying He will rescue them soon and take them 'home', God asks them to make a new home in exile. God asks them to put down deep roots into the land, the society, and the economy of their new home.

These words are a challenge to our culture's rootlessness, to the desire to continually look over the horizon for 'the next move', for 'a better place'. God is saying to us – wherever we live and however long or short a time we will live there – this is now your home – start to belong, invest in this place emotionally, financially and spiritually. Be at home where you are now – not where you dream of being one day in the future. Even though God's long-term purpose was indeed to take the people of Israel back to their Promised Land after 70 years (v.10), that didn't mean they were simply to wait to be rescued. Rather, God's plans to prosper and bless them, to give them a hope and a future, meant making the best of the less-than-perfect situation they were in now – to make it home.

Sadly, much modern Western Christianity seems to have forgotten this. We have created a dichotomy between this world and the world to come, and have told ourselves this is not really our home. We have seen ourselves as pilgrims, wanderers in an earthly wilderness,

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before we cross the Jordan to some vague distant shore – “Gloryland, way beyond the blue horizon” – as another song puts it. Yes, the bible uses the image of pilgrimage and travel, but it was always towards a physical earthly destination – a new home. Think of Abraham, think of Moses – called to go on journeys but with a clear end in view – a place where God wanted them to belong and to put down roots. The patron saint of our modern rootless Christianity has too often been Jonah – going on a journey to run away from God’s purposes, trying to avoid the city God had called him to.

You might think of Jesus’ words in Matthew 8:20, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” Isn’t this a biblical warrant for being a restless wanderer? Actually, no! Much of Jesus’ life was spent in a small rural community – thirty years learning his trade as a carpenter in Nazareth, before he spent 3 years as a travelling teacher and miracle-worker. The biblical principle of incarnation – of being born into a physical body, located in a particular time and place – rooted in a culture, a community and an eco-system that shaped who Jesus was and the stories he told – is the key principle. Although his ministry was an itinerant one, this was the exception rather than the rule and his saying about foxes and birds actually shows this! God’s plan in creation, for foxes and for birds and for us too, is to have homes and communities around us, like Adam, placed in the garden to tend and keep it. Sometimes, just occasionally God does call somebody to shake things up, to uproot, to challenge the status quo – as Jesus’ ministry did – but, and this is the important bit – the vision behind such a shaking-up is to create a new community, a transformed sense of belonging to God, each other, and creation that allows God’s plans for all creation to flourish.

Today, the biblical call most of us need to hear is not to get up and go somewhere else – we already hear that endlessly from TV and advertising. The call that most of us need to hear is to stay put – and deepen our roots in the places God has put us (whether or not God does call us to move on one day).

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, philosopher, poet says in his novel *Hannah Coulter*: “Most people now are looking for a ‘better place’, which means that a lot of them will end up in a worse one. ... There is no ‘better place’ than this, not in this world. And it is by the place we’ve got, and our love for it and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven.”⁵ He also says, “Love in this world doesn’t come out of thin air. It is not something thought up. Like ourselves, it grows out of the ground. It has a body and a place.”⁶ This is important – it is, again, the principle of incarnation, of making your home in Babylon, the place God has put you. Biblically, our love for God is not an abstract thing – a feeling conjured out of thin air. Love for God is shown in our love for our neighbour, and our love for the garden in which God has planted us.

⁵ Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, Counterpoint, 2006 ed., p.83

⁶ Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, Counterpoint, 2006 ed., p.88

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So, how are we to put down roots, to make sure we are at home? Jeremiah 29 gives us some very specific guidance. It encourages us to put down roots in four areas of life:

Firstly, we are to be **ecologically** rooted. God says in v.5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” In the Bible, our relationship with God is closely linked to our relationship with the land, the soil, and the food that comes from it. Adam was created from *adamah* – the human from the humus of the soil. The chosen people were placed in a promised land as a context for growing their relationship with God. The New Testament Greek word for home, *oikos*, is the root word for both ecology and economy. Ecology is the science of relationships. It has been well-defined as: “*A logic of the whole that is a home (eco-logos) a logic of the self in relation to the whole.*”⁷ God has created a world that is interdependent, where our dependence on God is learned as we depend on the sun, the rain, the good soil, and our fellow creatures. When we lose this connection – as million of urbanised people today have - we are spiritually impoverished and undernourished. When we put down roots and understand our local environment a bit more, our relationship with it begins to change. We recognise that we are not separate from nature, nor are we its lords and masters, but we are part of it – interdependent with it. So, putting down roots, learning to re-engage with the soil, are a vital part of the changed attitude to nature that we need to tackle today’s environmental crises. So, the simple question to us today is “What have you grown recently?” What have you tended, and nurtured, weeded and watered, sown and reaped? Whether it’s a window-box in an urban apartment, a small-holding, or a churchyard full of flowers, we will start to feel more at home, and to notice the changing seasons and our dependence on God through creation, if we start to grow things.

Secondly, we’re encouraged to be rooted in **community**. In v.6 God says “Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.” This isn’t just about biological parenting – it’s about building a thriving human community. In God’s church we are all – single, married, old and young - called to the task of caring for one another – of parenting children, of caring for the sick, housebound and elderly, of sharing meals and homes with each other. And our church communities should always be outward-facing too, welcoming the stranger, the newcomer, those who don’t yet feel at home. Churches should spill out into a wider community-building beyond their walls and meetings.

Thirdly, we are called to work for the **economic and political** well-being of our local area: v.7a “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.” Shopping locally, supporting local businesses, taking part in the local political process are part of our calling as Christians – striving to see God’s Kingdom come and God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

⁷ Holmes Rolston III, *The Bible and Ecology*, Interpretation 50, 1996, p.22

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Finally, we are to invest **spiritually** in our local areas, (v7b) “Pray to the Lord for it [the city, town or village God has placed you in], because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” It’s important to say that the biblical understanding of ‘prosperity’ was not our modern narrowly economic one. A better word might be ‘well-being’ or the biblical word ‘shalom’. Our prayers should be undergirded by a vision of God’s harmonious shalom rooted in our local areas – of people, wildlife and places transformed in the realities of the places we inhabit. As churches do we prayer-walk our local area together, asking God to give us eyes to see it as God does? We may find that the way we pray, and the effectiveness of those prayers, is transformed.

So, returning to where we started, are you at home in the place in which you live? If not, what is God calling you to do about it? Perhaps think through these dimensions of rootedness – the ecological, social, economic, political and spiritual – and ask God where you should be more deeply engaged? Where do you invest your time, your finances, your talents and gifts, your energy?

Bishop Bill Ind, the former Bishop of Truro in Cornwall, England says, “*As our experience of the world becomes increasingly global, so it becomes increasingly important for us to know where we belong, where our home is.*”⁸ He also adapts Julius Caesar’s famous words to say “*Veni, Vedi, Velcro*” ... “*I came, I saw, I stuck around.*”⁹ Today, we need ‘velcro’ Christians – people who are prepared to stick around in churches that are less than perfect, in communities that are falling apart, in places that are paradise lost. We are to stick around not out of stubbornness or laziness, not because our place is better than anywhere else, but simply because this is God’s way of being. God calls us to belong, to be deeply rooted in our relationship with Christ, a relationship that is nurtured as we learn to love the people, the creatures and the place where God has put us. We are inspired by the vision that one day, when Christ returns, we will know that “*God’s home is now among his people*” (Revelation 21:3), and we will be fully at home. As we seek to be more deeply rooted where God has planted us, may our homemaking be a good preparation for his homecoming.

⁸ Rt. Revd. Bill Ind, *With God we Can*, Truro: Truro Diocesan Board of Finance, 2007, p.18

⁹ Rt. Revd. Bill Ind, *With God we Can*, Truro: Truro Diocesan Board of Finance, 2007, p.19