

Sunday 12th July 2020 Christ Church, Grahamstown Cathedral, Grahamstown Spirit of the Wilderness, MN, USA		6th Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 55:10-13	Ps 65:8-13	Romans 8:1-11 Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE IN A TIME OF EXILE		

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”
(Isaiah 55:10-11)

LIVING IN A TIME OF EXILE

Our Old Testament reading for today (Isaiah 55:10-13) is a word of hope, a word that promises a future for the people of God. It comes from a very dark period in the history of Israel, the time of exile. All the symbols and signs of God’s abiding presence – the land, the temple, and the kingship – had been taken away or destroyed.

What is exile? It is being driven from one’s homeland, away from the familiar; away from that which we know and love; we are refugees; trying to build a future; grieving and longing for what we have lost, yet always wanderers. Nothing is familiar. Nothing is predictable.

Exile is a strange existence. It is a place and time of longing, waiting, hoping, grieving, looking back, looking forward; emptiness. In the words of the psalmist, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps 137:4)

Indeed, how can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? Because we could also say that we are in exile. The covid pandemic, the explosions of rage and angry protests over deeply embedded injustice, the instances of gender-based violence, have driven many of us away from what has been familiar and predictable. We no longer live in the land we thought we knew.

It is sobering to hear, almost daily, of new infections, and deaths. This past week, a young person I know posted on Facebook “feeling exhausted”. His status reads “It’s a very dark time to be alive.”¹ And indeed, we are living in a state of permanent uncertainty. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring; but now we REALLY don’t know what tomorrow will bring. Plans are on hold. Dreams for the future are deferred, or have ended. For young people especially, this is a strange and often very difficult time. I spoke with a colleague whose 19-year-old son hopes to go to university in Port Elizabeth next year; but the university is currently not taking any applications for 2021. His life is on hold, like so many other young people. The mental and emotional stress is very real. Our comfortable normality has been taken away from us, and we have been sent into exile.

¹ Xolisa Billie, Facebook page, 8th July 2020

The prophet Isaiah uses the predictability of the seasons to assure us of God’s faithfulness, even in our exile:

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, *so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it*” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

God’s will and purpose, Isaiah assures us, will come to pass – but not (we must add) in a way we can predict.

SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE (1)

In some ways, covid and the events of our times are a time of exile. But just as the exile became for the people of Israel an opportunity to rediscover their identity and their calling as the people of God, so this time of exile for us is a time to sow seeds of hope – to be people of hope. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises us a future. He assures us of his love. His word and his purpose will prevail. The seed of God’s word will bear fruit.

And here we move to the images of the sower and the seed, the familiar parable in our gospel reading.

There are two parts to the reading. The first part, vv 1-9, is

the original parable: the sower goes out, scattering the seed over various bits of ground. There is the path; there is the rocky ground; there is the thorny soil; and then there is the good soil that brings forth a wonderful harvest.

The second part of the reading, vv 18-23, is the interpretation. It focuses on the varied response from within the community of faith. The seed is the word of the kingdom, the word that comes from God. The different patches of the field, the different types of soil, are the different responses that people have to the word. These different responses can represent different communities; they could be how various people respond to the gospel; they could represent different stages, times, seasons in our own lives, and the ways we have responded – nor not – to God. So the parable asks of us the question about our response to the seed, the word of the gospel.

SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE (2)

But the parable of the sower and the seed has more to ask of us. In its original context, it is a reflection on the unbelief of the Jewish authorities contrasted with the faith and belief of the disciples. Now it asks, in a different way, what the psalmist was asking, “How can we sing a song of Zion in a strange land?” How can we believe, have faith, in the face of the hard ground, the rocks and thorns, the desolation around us? So the parable acknowledges the hard reality in which we live. And perhaps also it asks *why* – why do we choose to believe, in the face of so much

despair and cynicism and doubt? You and I walk every day over the hard ground, the hard ground of anger and rage and rejection, where the seed of the kingdom has almost no chance – anger caused by our painful history, by poverty, by desolation, the hard ground of gender-based violence. We walk amongst the thorns, over the rocky ground – the indifference, the fear, that avoids the hard questions. Yet you and I are called to be those who believe, who choose to be people of faith and hope and trust during these hard days.

AND SO...SOWING SEEDS IN A TIME OF EXILE

One of the themes that has been emerging during this covid time, during this time of rage and protest, is that the world we have built is deeply, profoundly flawed. We cannot, must not, simply return to same old, same old. We live in desperately unequal societies; the playing fields are not level. Life is wonderful for some, and very tough for others. Some of us have opportunities and resources that others can only dream of. Violence against women and children is a terrible and a tragic reality. Our country and many others have a history of violent conflict, dispossession and suffering. We have to build a future together that offers hope and healing for all. This time of exile is a time to rediscover our identity and our calling as the people of God.

Let's do all we can to sow seeds of the kingdom during this time of exile. Those seeds are the seed of love; the seed of

hope; the seed of faith and belief; the seed of compassion; the seed of reconciliation; the seed of justice; the seeds of truth-telling; the seeds of repentance. Seeds, actions, that lead to transformation, change, healing, a future.

CONCLUSION

May God guide and bless us during this time.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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