

Sermon: 2019/10/13 (18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; Psalm 66:1-11; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; & Luke 17:11-19_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

I have a confession to make
– and it may shock some of you.
I don't care for cats.
It's not that I'm allergic to them; I'm not.
I just don't really like them very much:
they're furry little psychopaths.
They are a nightmare for garden birds.

When I was growing up, we had a cat that we tied a bell round his neck so that he couldn't sneak up on any cute, feathered unsuspecting victims.
And in Jesus' day, people did the same to lepers:
they would tie bells to their clothing to warn others to stay away.

(Leprosy was an awful disease caused by a certain type of bacteria - a teeny-tiny, so small you can't see it kind of creature, which used to be very common in the ancient world - that could get inside the human body and destroy its ability to *feel*; "the nerves."
And often the sufferers of this horrible disease would eventually lose some of their body parts - fingers, toes, noses and so on, which meant they could look rather hideous, ugly and scary.

So, people cast you out of their home or out of their town.
They would *dis-own* you; pretend to not know you.
And how do you think it felt to be a leper, then?

[Wait for response.]

Right!

Lonely, miserable...

And these are things which we can do to others today too!

We can make others feel lonely and miserable.

We can push people away.

But we shouldn't!

God in Jesus shows us how we should respond to everyone with love, putting aside our fears or distaste. That's His challenge to us this morning.

Let's pray:

Lord God, ..., in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

You may not realise this, but there were *two* “Babylonian Exiles.”

That is to say, there were *two* episodes in which Babylonian soldiers marched into Judah and began large-scale arrests of (Jewish) men and women; and forcibly marching them eastwards across the northern Arabian Desert, in chains and shackles, in long lines, toward what is now Iraq-Iran, the empire’s heartland; and releasing them to live in make-shift slums - favelas - tent-cities - on the outskirts of the imperial capital.

Now, I concede that we don’t know *exactly* the conditions and terms of the deportations, but they weren’t great:

Remember that last week we heard in our Old Testament reading how, when they arrived ‘by the rivers of Babylon’, they ‘sat down’ and ‘wept’: [*Psalm 137*].

There wasn’t champagne.

They weren’t handed those Hawaiian necklaces of flowers to wear.

But they weren’t thrown into prisons either - *probably*.

Initially, at least, there may have been regular patrols of armed-guards to keep the Jews in place, but *really* the obstacle to their escape was the absolutely *vast* expanse of waterless wilderness that they had just been forced to cross:

like the surface of Mars.

If you didn’t have a camel or couldn’t afford to hire one, and if you didn’t know the few routes and oases that existed - which the People of God didn’t, of course, having become *thoroughly* adapted to the fertile hills of Canaan - then you might as well have been in a concentration camp behind barbed-wire and landmines.

Without local assistance, which wasn’t forthcoming, there was no. Way. Back.

The first group to make the trip was taken in 598 B.C. when King Jeconiah reigned.

King Jeconiah was a vassal - a “puppet” of Egypt, and Egypt was Babylon’s rival for regional supremacy, which is why he had to go: [*n.1*].

He was then replaced by King Zedekiah who, unlike his predecessor, promised fealty and taxes to Nebuchadnezzar, but then almost *immediately* turned around and made a mutual-defense pact with Pharaoh Hophra: [*n.2*].

You heard me allude to this the other week when I told the children in my Kids’ Talk that Zedekiah was a two-faced liar: [*n.3*].

And so when the second exile was imposed - in 589 B. C., so that’s decade after the other - it was *far* worse - much more *punitive* - than the initial one had been, and many, *many* more people were taken this time:

Whole towns were emptied.

The soldiers didn’t just take the ring-leaders.

Well, our *Jeremiah* reading today - described as a ‘letter’ - falls *between* the two calamities. And that is a bit confusing, really.

We’ve gone backwards in time, you see, since last Sunday.

I told you last time that (the Book of) *Lamentations* - a long poem - was composed when the prophet was in Egypt following the Exile, and yet here he talks about an exile that’s already happened but he’s in Jerusalem.

And I hope that what I’ve said now makes sense to you of the order of events:

He managed to avoid the first one, but the second was so destructive and vindictive - given King Zedekiah’s deception and betrayal - that he, even a critic of the monarchy, also ends up

being forced abroad.

And the extensive damage caused during the second round of arrests is visible in the archaeological record:

One of the few places, however, where life continued was in the mountainous region of what would become Samaria (in what is now called "the West Bank").

These Jews were surrounded by colonists who were "planted in" by the Babylonians from elsewhere, and, as "nature took its course," there was some inter-marrying, some "mixing," and the people who persevered until the time of Jesus came to be a group separate from mainstream Judaism: the "Samaritans."

Being suspect, then, for their "mixed," ambiguous ethnic origins;

Being suspect because they had continued the traditional Temple sacrifices of Moses and Solomon, albeit at a new site, on Mount Gerizim - the original (on Mt. Zion) having been destroyed at the beginning of what was the second Exile, *they* - the Samaritans - were held at arm's length by those - the majority - who eventually returned from Babylon.

And most of Jesus' contemporaries from Galilee - who periodically were required by the laws of Torah to attend feasts and festivals in the rebuilt Jerusalem in the south - would have avoided walking through the region to get there, and chose a longer, circuitous route and gone around.

Christ, though, has no time for such *nonsense* - for such racial animosities and prejudices - and so, we see, cut straight through, taking the most direct road;

and as He did he encountered a group of ten lepers.

The lepers were outcasts from *both* communities;

outcasts, in other words, from even the outcasts.

What a sad irony!

It exposes how *deep* we are all marked by inherent sinfulness, that even the persecuted and marginalised are bent toward persecution and marginalization; that we're all "bent" toward tribalism, toward "clique-ness," even as that very thing poisons a nation or a congregation. We become fixated on petty, external differences of habit or custom, whereas Jesus is *only* interested in the division between those who have faith and those who don't.

That's the *Christian* faith.

This is the faith that, He preaches, makes men and women 'well'.

Though that isn't necessarily the best translation.

Notice how the leper in question - the only one of the ten who returned to thank the Lord - is already "*well*," in a physical sense.

No, in the (original) Greek the word Christ uses is "σέσωκέν" ["*sesōken*"], which, more literally, means, "set you free." Or, "release."

Paul uses the same word in *Ephesians* about the gift of grace made through the Cross: [2:5].

This man - this ex-leper, in other words, hasn't just received what was asked for - that is, "*mercy*" for his *physical* condition (alone), but also something even more profound - a healing of the broken relationship that many of us have with God our creator.

And all this came from merely asking a simple question.

That was what the lepers had to do.

No more than that.

They simply had to approach the Savior asking for assistance that He had already decided to

extend them.

And I see in this episode a clear paradigm for action for us:
we need to be willing to ask simple questions too.

Of ourselves.

Of others.

To say: "What in you; in your community; in your family is calling out for *release*?"

Where do we need to see Divine mercy come in and set lives free?

And that means "releasing" pride and pretense; embarrassment and so on.

And allowing God to do what He is longing to do.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeconiah>
2. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zedekiah>
3. See: http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Sermon-20190929-16th-Sunday-after-Pentecost-Year-C-Jeremiah-32v1-3a6-15-Luke-16v19-31_BTR.pdf