

# THE RETURN OF THE EXILES

## JEREMIAH 31: 1-17

Isaiah and Jeremiah Series

### OPENING PRAYER

Grace and peace be with us: touching our past, shaping our present, inspiring our future, in the power of the living God, Amen.

### EXEGESIS

By this stage in Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, Babylonia has conquered Judah, and many people have been taken into exile. Now, rather than being a prophet of judgment, Jeremiah is a prophet of hope – looking to the days when the Israelites will be liberated and encouraging them to be steadfast.

But it's important to remember that Jeremiah is always 'at odds' with other kinds of prophet, in some respects. At the time when others were being consoling, reassuring the Jerusalem elite that all would be well, Jeremiah dared to stand out by naming the consequences of the elite's defiance of God's ways. Now, at a time when the Israelites look for their restoration and rebuilding in their homeland, Jeremiah does indeed speak words of hope – but always with a challenge too. So what is the challenge here ...?

In verses 1-6, he encourages the 'survivors', and says they shall be 'built up' – he urges them to rejoice, with tambourines, and dance, and to know they shall once again plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit. In verses 7-10, he exhorts the people to sing and shout with joy, for God will bring them from the distant places where they have been exiled, even with weeping; for they shall be consoled. Verses 10-14 reconfirm that the scattered shall be gathered; there will be planting and rejoicing and dancing; mourning shall turn into joy; all shall be satisfied. There is a cautionary note, in verse 15, because of those who have been lost, rightly remembering and weeping for them; but even so, Jeremiah urges them to turn from weeping: 'there is hope for your future', says the Lord.

With all these words of defiant comfort and consolation, what, then, is the challenge? It is the sheer inclusiveness of the vision! Unlike other dominant voices amongst the Israelites, which emphasise purity, and which therefore perpetuate systems of exclusion, Jeremiah's prophecy includes all in the homecoming – the blind and the lame, and those 'with child' (verse 8); that is, all whose vulnerabilities have caused them to be marginalised. It is a celebration which names the mourning, and which includes the precarious, without expecting them to be changed first – come, as you are, and rejoice!

## REFLECTION

Learning not to disown: a mission of mourning and rejoicing!

The British theologian, Andrew Shanks, identifies three ways in which we find ourselves inclined to be 'dishonest' (see more here: <http://bit.ly/2stSEru>). One of these is 'dishonesty-as-disowning', where we edit a certain part of our history in order to feel more innocent, more pure, more 'correct'. Jeremiah, in this passage, is alluding to this: the tendency- not least in a religious community- to yearn for innocence and purity, which therefore involves holding certain kinds of people at arm's length, or even further, for fear that they 'complicate' the picture.

Individuals do this, too –we do not want to be tainted by the sins of the group. It is 'dishonest', because it about trying to close ourselves off from the messy parts of our identities, to deny the muddle and complexity involved in being human. Instead, let's 'own' the mess. But more than that: 'the excluded' are not the problem anyway; it is the very act of exclusion which is the problem! So, we would do well to rediscover the wholeness of human community – with the mourning and the joy, with those with disabilities and those without, with young and old, women and men. Together, in solidarity with each other, they/we are 'a great company' – not to be divided against itself, or tempted to edit itself, but affirming of all our human complexity!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Within the Christian community, who have been the victims of this 'editing process', the tendency to purify the tradition so that we can feel more 'correct' and sorted?
- (2) How might we 're-own' those whom we have discarded or silenced or suppressed?
- (3) How might we be communities which truly hold 'weeping' together with 'dancing'?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Generous God, help us to understand how we have left people out or behind, but help us also to forgive ourselves, and our organisations or institutions, so we can move beyond the dishonesty and learn to be communities which celebrate all our diversity and complexity as gifts from you. So bless us with courage, grace and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, (Crossroad Publishing, 1998)