

### Paul Bradbury explores how the current pandemic might impact our understanding of Church

In this guest blog Paul Bradbury, pioneer minister and author of *Home by Another Route: reimagining today's Church*, finds echoes of our current circumstances in the Old Testament story of Exile.

*'Being a member of the Church of England is going to look very different in the days ahead. Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday, and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day.'* (from the Archbishops' letter to Anglican clergy 17.3.20)

A radical shift in how we are and do church has been forced upon us in ways that are completely out of our control. We are still adjusting. The world we inhabit, many of the rhythms and rituals that are the landscape of our lives have changed overnight. We do not know how long the present experience will last. Do we carry on as before, except online? Or does this new situation invite a very different kind of posture and identity as a church?

The situation has deep resonance for me with the story of exile. The destruction of Jerusalem and the enforced relocation of a substantial number of its citizens to Babylon was an immense crisis. A crisis not just in terms of how to survive, but in terms of what it meant to live and worship as the people of God. All the symbols and rituals bound up with life as God's people were gone. However, whilst exile was a theological and existential crisis it was also a period in which Israel experienced significant renewal as they faced the need to reframe and reimagine their lives as God's people.

There are 3 main themes to this renewal, each of which may well have significant resonance for the church today as we respond to our own crisis.

#### 1. A renewed vision of God's presence

God's presence was in the temple, but the temple was gone. A feature of the literature of the exile is the unlikely but very real presence of God in Babylon. The book of Ezekiel begins with Ezekiel being led by the Spirit to a remote place where he is overwhelmed by a vision of the presence of God (Ezekiel 1). Likewise, Jonah discovers God's grace and salvation at work in Nineveh (Jonah 3) and Daniel finds God meeting him and his friends in the furnace and the lions' den (Daniel 3 and 6). In exile we discover that God's presence is not confined to the limitations we have placed on him.

With our buildings shut and public worship on hold will we too rediscover God's presence in surprising places? In theory our theology no longer limits God's presence to our church buildings – 'surely I am with you always to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:20) – yet in

practice the particular spaces of our buildings holds a powerful hold over our imagination of where God can be found. Without access to that space, perhaps we may find our attention open to God's presence in all manner of places.

## 2. A renewed vision of holiness

How might Israel express their identity as a holy people in exile? It seems that without the temple Israel reoriented their communal identity around rhythm and rituals. Some scholars argue that the Levitical codes, which embrace every aspect of life in the call to be holy, were a fruit of this time. Others argue that circumcision and Sabbath-keeping emerge in this time as means of forming and maintaining identity and a life with and yet set-apart from their Babylonian neighbours. The shift is from ritual observance to a holistic communal life as a way of expressing identity and faith.

There has been a renewed emphasis in recent years on spiritual disciplines and a growth of interest in the concept of a 'rule of life' to frame our discipleship, both as individuals and communities. Perhaps this is because of a growing sense that attendance at church is not enough to make disciples in our post-Christendom age. But attendance was never enough. It was never designed to be enough. We were always been invited to be a people on the road with Jesus together, for whom all of life is invited to be expressed under the lordship of Jesus. This time provides a very rich opportunity to explore this together. To ask ourselves, what rhythms and practices can we explore that will enable us all to live, individually and together, as Christians in the everyday?

## 3. A renewed vision of mission

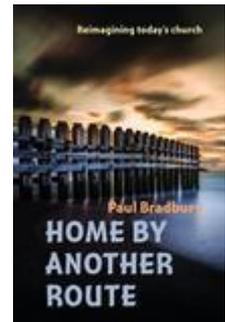
Exiled in a pagan culture, Israel were faced with the options of abandoning their faith, retreating into a private religion or assimilating with the host culture. They did none of these. New routes of hope and imagination emerged. These can be seen in particular in writings like the servant songs of Isaiah which begins to articulate a vision for Israel as a vulnerable community of suffering and service as a means of being a blessing to the world. Other stories such as those of Jonah, Esther and Daniel invite Israel to be obedient, faithful and to serve those around them as a minority community. Their prosperity is now bound up with the prosperity of others (Jeremiah 29:7).

As the church we have been shifting for some time away from having moral authority and a lead role in community provision. Movements such as Extinction Rebellion make it clear that Christianity has no monopoly on expressing the values of the Kingdom of God. We increasingly find room in our theologies for the notion that God is at work in our communities and we are invited to join in. But control and playing the role of host is a hard habit to break. In my street circumstances have meant that I have been unable to provide any lead in organising a community response. But others have stepped into that space and we are supporting as best we can. Might this time offer us an opportunity to adopt a different posture of mission? One where others lead, and we serve as a means of blessing others.

There is no doubt that these are testing times. Gathering for worship in some form is important and live streaming of services has been creatively and impressively adopted by many already. The pastoral support of those in our church communities who are ill, isolated and vulnerable is also a key priority. However, I believe this time is a time in which the very nature of what it means to be church is open to questions and open to experimentation. The stories of exile offer a rich template and resource for this exploration. They show that crisis is the ferment for renewal if we press into the invitation that God has for us to trust Him in this new and uncertain world.



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This blog originally appeared [here](#).