

Sunday, 1st of March, 2020

'No place like home...'

Introduction:

As you heard earlier on, this is the first installment in our Lent series, called "*Exile*"; a theme that we're going to be exploring over the next six weeks, as we journey towards Easter. A specific focus of this 'Exile' series, are the things within us and also outside of ourselves that cause us to be in *exile*, in all sorts of ways.

As we begin, it's important to briefly mention what we mean by the word, 'exile'. Commonly, it's a term used to describe a person or process that involves being barred or banished from 'one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons, but sometimes, by choice'. We often think of leaders who historically have been exiled from their homeland, including Napoleon Bonaparte and the Dalai Lama, to name just a few.

From a biblical perspective though, the *word* 'exile' features only twice, according to the King James translation; once in 2 Samuel 15, and again in Isaiah 51. Two different words are used, but together they capture something of the extent of what it means to be exiled.

In 2nd Samuel, the word 'galah' is used in the context of David fleeing Jerusalem, when Absalom his son, takes David's throne and steals the hearts of the Israelites. It's a Hebrew word that carries deep humiliation. In it's original context it meant to be 'strip naked in a disgraceful sense'. War films that show French women who had fraternized with German soldiers - post the Liberation, being shorn of their hair, stripped to their undergarments, and being banished, comes closest to the meaning of exile here. Exile is not for the feint-hearted.

But it's not the only graphic image of 'exile' on display. When the Prophet Isaiah thinks of exile he uses another Hebrew phrase, which comes from an ancient word meaning 'to tip over, and to be poured out'.

The Hebrew word 'Tsa'ah' carries with it a strong sense of a country being completely emptied. Like the African men, women and children who were snatched from their homeland, loaded onto slave ships, from the West Coast port of Liberia never to return, 'exile' is a word that carries a sense of being cut off, of utter 'alienation' from what was.

David Riddell, Christian counselor and founder of Living Wisdom speaks of this sense of what this alienation must've felt like. When David would get sick as a boy, he was banished by his parents, to an out-house, often at night. If he were physically sick, David would be left to clean himself up, as

best as he could – over an animal trough. One of the memories of that harrowing time was hearing the wind blow through the tall poplars, which added to this sense of desolation. These echoes and feelings of this kind abandonment, David still feels every time he hears the wind blow through the trees, even today, some sixty years on...

But let's be clear, '*exile*' in the Bible is not just limited to an occasional word, or even a feeling but is, as we've heard in today's clip, a major, major theme of Scripture and of our life of faith.

As the commentators from the Bible Project have already shared, we see this pattern of exile through Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden; in the experience of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt; and in the lament of the Jews who wept by the rivers of Babylon, as we hear in Psalm 137 ... This repeating pattern of being physically exile stretches out all the way through the entire Old Testament...

But, as the Bible Project points out, this not just a '*physical*' exile. These 'exiles' are often an outward manifestation of a much deeper, spiritual predicament; a reality of Israel's fractured and sometimes resistant relationship towards 'Yahweh', often of their own doing. In Scripture, this picture of '*exile*' – '*of being far away from home*' comes often at the hands of others, but more frequently as a consequence of people's broken choices. The Prophets warn the people of God, that as a result of their willful rejection of God and His Covenant, foreign nations will come and carry them away from the land Yahweh has given them. Each one symptomatic of a deeper spiritual exile going on... In the next few weeks as, we move through this series we'll hear from Kate and Josh as to what this exile looks like in our own lives; but it's enough to consider in what ways have you ever experienced an 'exile' yourself; whether because of someone else's actions or because of your own? You may have chosen to live in a foreign land, like my parents did, an exile of sorts, as you look for a better future for your kids? However you may have ended up here, this kind of alienation, this inescapable feeling of being far away from home, can affect us all...The good news, though, is no matter how we got here, in Christ, God comes to answer this deep sense of 'exile'...

To make sense, though, of what '*exile*' means, it's important to recognize that we can only make sense of 'exile', if we truly understand what we mean by '*home*'.

The idea of '*home*', in contrast to '*exile*' - gets mentioned more than 50 times Scripture. What seems to emerge from them all, but especially in the Greek word '*oikia*', [rather than 'ikea',] is home is not just merely a place, but speaks of 'family'. In the Western context when we think home, we imagine the physicality of our own 'houses', the décor, the furniture. But in

a Middle Eastern first-century context, the word 'home' is about relationship. I wonder what comes to mind, when you think of home? Is it just a place? Or is it perhaps family or friends? Or is it possibly the association of both? It's where the people who love you, gather in a place you call home...

The idea of home is something that lies deep within us... The desire to be at 'home' – to be loved as we are, to be understood, to be at rest, to be cared for without reserve, is something we all long for in a home.

This idea of 'home' and where it is to be found is right at the heart of Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son and what God offers us in Christ. After the renegade son, has his fill of what this world has to offer, and is humiliated by a devastating famine, we read in verse 17, that when he comes to his senses, the younger son begins to think of home... What's interesting to me, as I've read it time and again this week in several versions, is *where* this 'home' is to be found...

In today's New Living Translation the focus of his coming 'home', is to a physical location. Yet, the King James never uses the word '*home*' once. The KJV always equates the idea of returning home, instead as a return to not a location but a relationship, a return to the Father...

Verse **18**: "I will arise and go [not to my home, but] to my father...."
²⁰ And he arose, and came [not to his house but] to his father."

That's where our true home is to be found; in the company of our loving Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The importance of 'home' being 'a who' rather than 'a where' was something I saw very clearly in my Dad.

When Dad talked of 'home' I often thought he meant his birthplace of Blaengwynfi, in South Wales. This is a photo of Blaengwynfi that was shown at his funeral in 2017.

But over the years, I came to understand for Dad that 'home' was far more about '*relationship*' and especially about the love he received from his mother. Like many of his mother's generation, his Mum Margaret went into service in an English manor in the 1920's ... Returning to Blaengwynfi she married Chris, a coal-miner from the same street, and soon after my Dad, Meurig, their firstborn son was born.

In a WW2 era, where my Nan had to cook on a coal range, heat water to bathe the family, and wash everything by hand, this kind of care and loving attention, created for my father an indelible sense of home and of being loved...

It was the yardstick by which every other home was measured...

It was the place that Dad called home... when he left to join the merchant navy;

It was home when he left London aged 45 to immigrate with his family to New Zealand... Why? Simply because of his Mum's loving care.

I wonder where feelings of home arise for you? Who in your life has helped cultivate a sense of home for you? Give thanks to God for them, because they help us understand the wider love that our Heavenly Father has for us, and His desire that we should be at home with Him.

It's important to say here that, that not everyone, experiences the welcoming embrace of an unconditionally loving father or mother... I've referenced before the narrow, fault-finding picture of God that American author Ernest Hemmingway, grew up with - courtesy of his own mum, that followed him to his tragic grave. But we get a glimpse of the scale of 'alienation' he felt from his own family, in one of his short stories, that tells of a Spanish father whose son - Paco runs away from home to Madrid. With the aim of being reconciled to his son, the father puts an ad in one of the major newspapers. It simply says: "Paco - meet me at Hotel Montana, noon Tuesday. All is forgiven." Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds eight hundred young men named Paco waiting to reconcile with their fathers." It's a story that captures something of the longing Hemmingway felt for home. And something that we too can feel as we wonder whether the father in the prodigal son story is as good as Jesus seems to make him out to be?

The message that Jesus gives us, is that where the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is, there is a real home to be had for each of us. The question remains, though, can we experience it, this sense of 'home', in the here and now, with all the pressures and distractions we face?

The answer is 'yes' ... St Paul, who knew it from his own experience, shares how the Spirit brings this sense of home in our hearts, so we can know for ourselves the love, peace and acceptance that the Father offers us.

Romans 8 makes it clear:

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..."

That's why spending time each day, being regularly filled again with the Spirit daily in prayer is so vital. It's a tangible way we can experience a true sense of home. Worship, reading the Scriptures all do the same. If you need a fresh experience of God's Presence, can I encourage you to seek prayer for this at the conclusion of the service, so that you mind be filled with that Spirit that cries Abba, Father.

But also, we as the Church, the body of Christ, here at St. George's want to be a place where the Father, Son and Spirit makes His home. Our sense of being at home in God is something we were never meant to experience alone. St. Paul tells the Ephesians that together they were to be a home in which God dwells.

Ephesians 2:20-22 says it well:

"God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home."

The question for us here at St George's is, what kind of expression of the Father's home and welcome do we seek to be...?

- i. We want to reflect the Father's extravagant, welcome; no matter who you are, no matter where you've come from, you can experience the unmerited love, forgiveness and favour of God. That's the kind of people we want to be, and also the kind of place we want to be; come as we are, to a place of grace... It's why we welcome you each Sunday with the specific message that you are welcome just as you are. Romans 5: ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Grace is where we begin."
The risk, that the elder son fell into was the misbelief we often get into as the family of God, that we are here on our own merits. Taken a step further, our idea of 'home' can be built on what we do for God, rather than what He has done for us. Like the eldest son, we can start listing all that we've done for our Heavenly Father, thinking these are what make us children of God. Your status, my status as a child of God, isn't dependent upon what you have or haven't done for God' Our status is something conferred to us by God's act of pure gift and grace.
- ii. St George's is a place where we want you to experience the extravagant love of God for yourselves... But not just that... We want each one of us to be transformed in that encounter... and as we learn together what it is to be Jesus' disciples...
We don't know how what happened to the younger son, after that welcome back party, but I wonder what difference came over that younger son, as he realized perhaps for the first time, where his true home was to be found? How did that change Him? Our desire is to be a community of Christ-like change. We want to put things in front of us, that will help bring that change. Life

Groups, Men's Group, Women's Ministry and Bible studies, a new Alpha Course we will be offering for our ESOL community we're already planning for. We want to grow together to become like Jesus.... For as St. Augustine says, 'Our hearts are restless, until our hearts find our hearts rest in thee'.

As a practical response can I recommend something to you?

Can I encourage any of you who may be interested in exploring this theme of 'homecoming' more deeply, there is a retreat set for the end of March, at the Mercy Spirituality Centre on this very theme. The retreat explores more fully this idea of what it means to come home. **As retreat facilitator and a St Georgian, Eamon Butler, says:**

Jesus' parable of *The Prodigal Son* is one of the most profound insights to the nature of God's compassionate and unconditional love for us. In the retreat we will explore the spiritual reflections by Henri Nouwen on Rembrandt's painting of the homecoming scene of the younger, rebellious son. These valuable spiritual insights can serve to increase our hunger and thirst for a deeper union with God on our interior journey of transformation.' Details are in the newsletter.

Finally, the fullness of our 'homecoming' to the Father, through Christ's Cross and Resurrection, is not just for the here and now, but is also a homecoming that is eternal. This is especially good news for those of us who dealing with the fragility of our own lives. It's why at Supper with his disciples, Jesus tells them when He is leaving, that he isn't so much going home, as He is going 'to the Father'. John 16 sums it up when Jesus says: **"I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world & am going to the Father."**

Jesus was at home with His Father, and He's where our true home is to be found. Now and forever, Amen.