

Last week we began our series on Exile. Gareth opened up the biblical meanings of the words we read for being in exile - and there is a strong sense of banishment, humiliation and losing one's previous identity. Exile is not for the faint-hearted. It is not a fun experience.



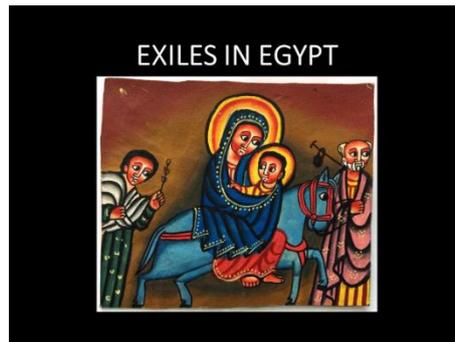
Think of those passengers quarantined on the Diamond Princess, in exile from their homes and families, their travel plans. In fact Covid-19 has created a whole swag of exiles and displaced people. Here is New Zealand the Christchurch earthquakes forced many southerners into exile, if not temporarily from their homes while they were being rebuilt, then permanently as businesses and communities were literally flattened and their livelihoods and very lives felt threatened. Or young people who cannot afford to live in the city they grew up in and find themselves seeking a home in a cheaper place, far from the security of family and familiarity.

But if there is one example of exile that seems to me to sum up all the horror and risk and vulnerability of the situation it is of a little traveller from a far-flung country, ravaged by natural disaster, who must make his way in a foreign and, well, fairly uptight land. None other than Paddington Bear.

VIDEO CLIP

We all experience exile in some form or another and this morning I want to explore three

times when Jesus himself was in exile. What can we learn from these episodes about the nature of God? What can we learn about ourselves as we face our own exiles?



We begin at Christmas, well, just after the Christmas story traditionally wraps up because this is where things begin to head south. The magi have weaved their way home by another route and Herod is on the warpath. Joseph is warned in a dream that his little family must flee immediately to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous intentions. Jesus, as a tiny baby, is found in exile. In Egypt. A place which has a complex history for the Jews. Many centuries earlier it had also provided a safe haven for another Joseph, and his father Jacob, and his brothers, in the face of famine. Yet later on it would become their oppressive slave empire, from which the Exodus would occur. Yet this is specifically where God led Joseph and Mary and Jesus to protect them from the puppet-king, Herod. Once Herod is dead, Joseph receives another dream to return home. Although not to the home they had previously known, but to Nazareth.

The second episode is frequently referenced in this season of Lent. Jesus has now grown up into a man, and has encountered his cousin John the Baptist, in the wilderness (another sort-of self-imposed exiler). He has been baptised and received God's affirmation of his purpose and love.



"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished." Luke 4:1-2

He is led into the desert by the Holy Spirit for 40 days of fasting and prayer. He finds himself tempted three times by Satan, and each time he remains firm in his knowledge of God's supremacy. Only after he has been through this wilderness experience, this temporary exile, is he then ready to start his ministry.

The final episode doesn't necessarily involve a geographical exile, although Jesus does remove himself to pray. Rather it is more of a spiritual exile, as Jesus prepares for the suffering which he is about to face. Let's pick up in Mark's Gospel



Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

32 They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' 33 He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. 34 And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and

keep awake.' 35 And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. 36 He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'

Jesus' desperation for another way is vindicated when, on the cross he experiences the ultimate in exile, crying out those haunting and excruciating words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What have I done to deserve this exile? Why have I been banished, humiliated, abused, cast away?

Three episodes, three different experiences of exile. And there are three useful reflections on our experience of exile from each of these stories.

EXILE REFLECTIONS

- God uses exile for our protection
- God uses exile for our transformation and growth
- We can trust God in our exile



Firstly,

GOD USES EXILE FOR OUR PROTECTION.

Exile is never someone's first choice. There are very few people who would willingly put themselves into exile. Yet God uses exile for our protection. Sometimes the alternative is much much worse, as many refugees and asylum seekers can attest to. Just because we are in exile doesn't mean that God isn't looking out for us. In fact, that might be God precisely looking out for us. And when the time is right, we might get to return home. But, as in the baby Jesus' case, sometimes our return is not as straightforward as we might hope. Home may be a different landscape, or may have different agendas. We too will be changed by our experience of exile.

Which brings me to my second reflection.

GOD USES EXILE TO TRANSFORM AND GROW US.

Jesus' wilderness experience gave him valuable time to pray and to strengthen his faith in the teeth of the devil. A period of testing will prove fruitful. Jesus taught in John 15 that: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

The wandering of the Israelites in the desert for forty years was necessary for them to understand what it meant to be God's people. To live God's way, to follow God faithfully. When we are forced into exile, we are going to be transformed. The question is, who is doing the transforming. Just as the Prodigal Son in Gareth's sermon last week, came to his senses, he grew up, he realised how his situation had changed his perspective on what mattered most, so too we can see our circumstances of exile as an opportunity to discover more about ourselves and God. Perhaps we too can grow and be transformed, prepared for the next season of life and ministry that God has in store for us. Perhaps we can use exile to heal and forgive and to ask for forgiveness.

Finally,

WE CAN TRUST GOD IN EXILE

Being in exile is overwhelming, it can strip us of our identity, our purpose and our hope. But I am struck by the opportunity it also offers us, to surrender ourselves afresh to God. In the knowledge that Jesus knows what it is like to surrender, to be emptied. The beautiful hymn of praise in Philippians 2 reminds us that Jesus didn't grasp after being God, but emptied himself, becoming a human. What an exile that must have felt like! To choose to let go of everything and be humbled as a baby, dependent on others, to be betrayed, to be assaulted, to be scorned, to be killed. We can trust God in exile because God has been through exile too. We can trust God in the exile and allow ourselves to be

emptied of all our regrets, our wishful thinking, our "if onlys".

Perhaps this morning you are feel in the exile of new-parenthood, wondering what this strange land is that you have stumbled bleary-eyed into and how much fun all your friends are having without you. Or perhaps it's the exile of retirement or redundancy, second-guessing who you are, what your value is, and whether you'll ever make a contribution again. Or you are separated by geography or conflict from those you love and are desperate to be reconciled with. May you know that exile is not the final word. That we will one day attain the glory of God's kingdom in all of its fullness. That we will know and feel the richest and most profound love from God. And may you know that until that time, this exile can be a journey of growth, a pilgrimage journey, a journey of surrender and a weary spirit being filled with the life of the Holy Spirit over and over again.