

Say the word 'exile' today – and first image that springs to my mind – that of sight of those thousands of refugees fleeing their native lands - in search of peace, safety and security. Families forced to flee their own countries – in a self-imposed & probably permanent exile.(House Group discussion point)

When it came to choosing some Bible passages for this 9 a.m. service theme on 'Exile' - well, no shortage to pick from – (5 + 5 messages – some v brief!). Starting with these vv from **Genesis 3** – end of the chapter, the end of Paradise – but not the end of the story! Indeed it is only the beginning of the Biblical account of humanity's life lived out in a now 'fallen' world.

In one sense, theologically speaking, we are all living in 'exile' – in that we cannot regain what is lost in the sorry goings on in Genesis Chapter 3. And it's become something of an evangelical cliché to say, *'Well, what do you expect, it's a fallen world.'* (House Group discussion point). Genesis 3 & these vv at the end remind us of the Scriptural truth of that.

Far too sweeping & glib to use 'fallen world' response alone in discussions & debates about, war, disease, disaster, suffering, pain + 1000 other examples of plague & pestilence that stalk the planet.

But it's a starting point – where we are is not where God originally intended us to be. **'Where are you?'** is the question asked of 'Adam' in **3v9**. *God wants fellowship with his creature – but creation has rebelled against Creator – fellowship is now replaced by banishment.*

Taken literally, the account of events as recorded in **2**
Gen 3 may seem a tad hard on 'Adam & 'Eve' – and certainly tough on the rest of humanity down the ensuing millennia – who have no say in what went on in that garden. But these opening chapters of Genesis, were written and given to us, I believe, to hold up as a mirror to ourselves

Genesis 3 (+ all of opening chapters) - not so much history as much more a profound theological statement about human rebellion, self-will in the midst of divine free will & the consequences to be faced as a result.

God 'bars the way' back into the original, idyllic Garden, after having driven humanity out. So here at the start of God's word is **my** 'fall', **my** rebellion, **my** self-will – and **my own** 'exile' from God. Fortunately, we are only at Genesis 3 – it may be the end of the beginning – but it is only the beginning of what God has planned in the end.

As we watch Adam & Eve depart Paradise – with maybe a few lingering backward glances at that flaming sword, so we, gathered together in the quiet & stillness of this early morning hour, know & give thanks that there is a 'way back' from 'exile from God'. This table acts as a theological backdrop to our theme this morning – and we shall reach this table in due course.

1 Kings 19 vv1-13 – our second picture of exile comes from this point in the story of Elijah. He has just won a great battle – one of the most graphic in the OT – prophets of Baal go down to a big 'home defeat' by Yahweh.

'The Lord he is God, the Lord he is God!' is the cry now **3** a great moment in the life of Elijah, prophet of God. His spiritual courage, faith & physical strength 'in the power of the Lord' as he outruns Ahab's chariot – all the way from Mt Carmel to Jezreel ('marathon').

But now comes 'the morning after' & the threat from the real power behind Ahab's throne – Jezebel! E's life under threat & so he heads off on another, even longer journey way down south to Beersheba. After some divine intervention via some angelic catering, Elijah ends up in a cave on Mt Horeb (Sinai).

Now comes the piercing question ***'What are you doing here, Elijah?'*** I wonder how many of us here this morning have heard that same question asked of us by the Lord, at some point along the way of our journeying with him? Not going to ask you now – far too confrontational for 9 a.m. service! But might be something you'll feel able to share in House Group maybe?

Certainly a sudden & unexpected low point for E after his spiritual 'high'. 'The word of the Lord' disappears in these opening vv of chapter 19. This journey south to Beersheba & beyond was certainly not on God's agenda. Even so, we note how God provides for Elijah in the midst of his own terror & 'exile'. (cf our experiences?)

Satan has many weapons in his arsenal – envy, pride, jealousy, lust, greed, sloth & all the rest. But one of his most insidious & (perhaps) most often deployed is the weapon of DISCOURAGEMENT.

That's what's happened to Elijah here. Just off the back4 of a big evangelical rally with loads of converts – a battle won, but not the war.

Survey in Baptist Times -over 50% of ministers have considered packing it all in at some point in their ministry. 'Burn out' not confined to stressed out 21st century - here in 9th cent. BC Elijah needed to eat & rest & time to get a reminder from the Lord to get things back into perspective (sound familiar to anyone?) Question 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' not just asking about the prophet's 'Sat Nav' settings, but also referring to his physical, spiritual & mental welfare.

God's great prophet is depressed – not the last be so either. Spurgeon preached to an average of some 5000 people every Sunday – now that's what I call a good turnout! And yet one of his biographers pointed out that Spurgeon frequently suffered from moods of black depression. And THAT can be one of the darkest of exiles for **some**.

'I'm the only one left' – a statement ***'somewhere between exaggerated self-loathing & exaggerated self-importance.'*** Loss of self esteem & self belief, a selective memory that forgets God's provision in the past & a lack of trust for the future – all contribute to Elijah's personal 'exile' in that cave.

And having demonstrated his power and presence in fire, God now shows himself to be equally present in the 'gentle whisper', the 'still, small voice' – a bit like the difference between the 9 & 11 a.m. services maybe!

And, again maybe some of us have been in that cave,⁵ have heard that same still, small voice & been brought back out of exile – as is Elijah here. He is not alone, the Lord still has more work for him to do – as he has for each of us.

Psalm 137 – the only reading that describes an actual exile! Lines written by those leading Jews taken into exile in Babylon – left feeling that God had abandoned them.

An actual exile is not something that we here will experience, praise God - although adjusting to life in Lichfield, for all its many charms, has had its challenges for us both in retirement. Grew up in West Midlands, true - *'I can still speak the language'* - but from 1966 to 2008, including all our married life, lived 'down south' or E Anglia. Weekend in Cambridge last month = 'home'..

As a result of the Exile referred to here in Psalm 137, Israel via the prophets of the time, was given a new insight & understanding of the sovereignty, power & presence of God - even when all seemed to be defeat & despair...again that may ring bells for some.

Luke 4 vv16-30. So to the NT & the account of Jesus in his own backyard. Luke describes this incident so graphically – *'the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened upon him..'* Recall those Sundays ***'preach with a view'***...! Preachers know what that feels like!

But when the audience hears the content of Jesus' message, then the initial interest & charm turns to indignation & hostility. *'The gospel always causes division'* – Dr Morris West at BBC.

Paul was to know violent reaction to his sermons – as 6 have many preachers since.

It's OK when you stay in the 'safe' comfort zone, nice cosy three pointer to take home for Sunday dinner, but step outside that & start to challenge people with God's word, then expect some hostility. *'Who does he think he is, anyway?'* The loneliness of the long distance prophet...

Is not this Joseph's son? Delight – what a speaker, how eloquent! But this is not Joseph's son – this is Son of God – message for all humanity that encompasses all humanity. A message not just for those who claim exclusive rights – those who react so strongly to what Jesus says here about Gentiles being saved. Jesus' message 'exiles' him from his own...

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ – Eph 2v13. Here at our early morning Communion service, we can be thankful that the one who faced the ultimate exile, brings home all who feel 'beyond redemption'. So – to our final reading...

Mark 15 vv33-37 – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Cry of dereliction from the cross – quoting from Psalm 22 – which begins in despair – but ends in expression of ultimate trust in God (as do many other Psalms).

These = only words spoken by Jesus on cross in Mark's Gospel – sense of utter abandonment – 'exile' from God.

We began in banishment from 'Eden' – but here, now at 7 Cross & at this Table are sign & symbol of an end to all 'Exile' from God.

Many forms of 'exile' other than actual displacement from own country – discussion points for House Groups.

'Exile' of loneliness > bereavement > depression > redundancy > singleness > retirement > disability > even, at times, sense of 'exile' from church family (coffee time challenge!)

But here is bread & wine – the New Covenant. Here is an end to our sin, an end to our failure, an end to our darkness – an end to all our exiles. So, now let us celebrate this homecoming together - after some further prayers...