

Integral Church

Whenever it was I first came across it, the opening of Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles became one of my (many) favourite pieces of scripture. His prophetic message is both corrective and hopeful: despite what their local prophets were saying, the exiles were there, not for a short stay, but for the long haul: therefore they should settle down and make themselves at home, growing crops and contributing to the life of the place – even praying for their captors. But this isn't assimilation: by seeking to thrive and multiply, they were preparing for the eventual return to the land which the Lord intended for them.

To me that chimes with that Anglican pastoral concern for the wider communities within which our congregations are set; even for those who do not share our faith. We are to pray for them and seek their welfare – for in their welfare we will find our welfare. I can also relate it to the times in my life when I have had to make my home in a new place, and experienced, in a small way, that sense of being an outsider, an incomer, even an exile. Even if we haven't moved geographically, as we get older we can find that society has moved on in a way which threatens to leave us behind: we start to feel like aliens in our own land. And, as I've remarked before, the biblical experience of exile can resonate with how it feels to be a committed Christian within an increasingly secular culture. As I said in my Harvest sermon, rather than turning inwards, we need to continue to sow seeds of faith and love in our local communities (and further afield).

But this morning, rather than identifying with the Israelite exiles, I'm moved to turn things around and invite us to consider ourselves as the Babylonians, relating to people making their home among us; who may want to maintain their identity, yet seek the welfare of our communities. Does God want them to thrive? And if so, what does that ask of us?

You don't need me to tell you that in our lifetimes, Britain has become much more racially diverse. But it's taken time for that change to penetrate rural Norfolk. The new housing has had an impact on Acle: I'm seeing more black faces around the village. People making their home among us. I wonder if others have noticed that? And how we feel it? Is it a welcome or unwelcome development? Does it excite joy, curiosity, or fear?

I have pretty minimal multi-cultural experience, but I've no desire to inhabit a bastion of white Britishness. To me it feels as though our area is coming of age; and we need to be open to that. Not least in the Church – if we are truly to be the Church of 21st century England. But it must be said that our Church's record on that front is not good: national report after report has made that point.

One of the things which struck me about the diocesan clergy conference was that it felt more ethnically diverse than three years ago. Damilola Makinde made a significant contribution to that: from London, she led our Bible study in a way which, I imagine, owed a lot to her Nigerian diaspora heritage. But we are more diverse, too. In our own deanery we have welcomed the Revd Cheryl Ramballi to minister in the Ranworth area; while former Nottingham black Pentecostal Jassica Castillo-Burley is the new Team Vicar in Great Yarmouth. Making their home among us; seeking the welfare of our communities. Inclusion and diversity are aspects of our diocesan vision; but a worthy aspiration is one thing; experiencing it taking flesh among us is another. And I welcome it. It's not just about reflecting the diversity of our country: I reckon we have something to gain spiritually.

For many of Jesus' fellow-Jews, Samaritans were unwelcome outsiders. Suspicion of them can be traced back to the division of the kingdom following the reign of Solomon. The biblical record accuses the northern kingdom of Israel of apostasy – but most of that history was written in Judah, from a Jerusalem-centred point of view. When the northern kingdom fell (interpreted as a judgement from God) Samaria was strategically repopulated with divers other conquered people, thereby forfeiting any residual ethnic or religious purity. In the eyes of orthodox Jews, Samaritans were deviant and suspect.

Unlike the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus didn't write the script of the thankful leper. But how quickly he drew attention to the racial identity of the one who returned to praise God; not for the first time implying that his own people had something to learn from this outsider.

A while back, we invited the Revd Karlene Kerr (now Racial Justice Officer in the diocese) to speak to our deanery synod. I noticed not everybody warmed to what she had to say; but I found that I gained from listening attentively to someone who looked at and experienced our Church and society from a different background and perspective. That can come with a challenge: to test out my inherited, white assumptions, behaviours and view of history; but surely such things need challenging – just as much as the cultural and religious assumptions of the Jews of Jesus' day. I need to discover to what extent I am perpetuating the superiority and oppressive actions of my ancestors.

And I want ministers like Karlene, Jassica and Cheryl to thrive – and those Christians of divers racial backgrounds in our communities, as they make their home among us. Although the advantage, the power and the writing of history is on my side, we are one in Jesus Christ: on their welfare, my spiritual welfare may well depend.