

Seek the welfare of the city

Jeremiah 29:1-14 (Other readings: Hebrews 11:1-2, 13-16; Luke 13:31-35)

*A sermon preached by **Richard Higginson** at the final service of the Faith in Business Conference in April this year.*

There's a verse from our Old Testament reading which I frequently hear cited these days. It's Jeremiah 29:11: 'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.' One entrepreneur we interviewed has this verse written on the pen that he uses every day. It keeps him feeling hopeful.

It is indeed an encouraging and inspirational verse, but there is a danger that we apply it to our lives in too cosy and domesticated a way. We need to be aware of the context to which these words were first directed. That is both a corporate context and a context of crisis. As will be evident from the reading, this verse was directed to Jewish exiles who found themselves in the city of Babylon in the sixth century BC. They were people who had gone seriously astray, who were down on their luck and down on their knees. They were strangers and exiles in a foreign land. We do not have to look very far elsewhere in Scripture to discover this was a situation they resented hugely. Consider the opening words of Psalm 137:

'By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion'.

A psalm which ends with the bitter and shocking refrain:

'O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to

us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!'

That was the first and natural instinct of the Jewish exiles in Babylon: self-pity and a longing for revenge. They hated being in Babylon. They longed to be back in Jerusalem.

It's interesting how that idea of being strangers and exiles gets taken up in the New Testament, notably in the passage from Hebrews which we also had read. Hebrews 11 speaks of the men and women of faith, whose forward-looking mentality showed that 'they were strangers and exiles on the earth'. What they desired was 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them'. All this seems to give support to the words of the old hymn, 'This world is not my home – I'm just a passing through' which goes on to say 'I can't feel at home in this world anymore'.

Over the 29 years I've been running Faith in Business I have often bewailed the fact that only a small minority of Christians in business seem to be serious about applying their faith to their work. And only a small minority of Christian leaders seem to be serious about affirming, encouraging and equipping the Christians in their congregations who work in business. I wonder if for both groups the explanation lies in the view that what goes on in business doesn't really matter – it's a sideshow compared to the great matters of eternal salvation. If this earth is not our home, why invest serious emotional energy in matters

of industry and commerce? Isn't it important to maintain the sense that we're only strangers and exiles, so that we don't get lured away by the preoccupations and temptations of worldly success?

The answer is that there is *some* truth in this. It is important to retain that sense of where our true home is – the heavenly Jerusalem. But I suggest a more appropriate response to our status as strangers and exiles is to follow the advice of the prophet Jeremiah:

'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters..."'

This is remarkable advice. Later on in his book, Jeremiah pronounces oracles of doom and judgment on Babylon for all its arrogance and iniquity. He was under no illusions about its failings. Cities in the Bible are often the centres of resistance and rebellion to God's will – in our Gospel reading we see Jesus lamenting over the Jerusalem of his day.

But here Jeremiah takes a different tack. Contrary to those who were predicting a short exile, Jeremiah predicts a sizeable stay of at least two generations. He tells the Jews to accept their exile and settle down to a normal existence in Babylon: building houses, planting gardens, getting married, bearing kids – all the stuff of everyday life. You may be strangers and exiles, but the clear message is 'get stuck into life in Babylon'.

And that's a message for Christian businesspeople. We may sometimes feel like strangers and exiles, we may never be entirely at home in the corporate culture, but we are called to get stuck in.

The heart of Jeremiah's message is contained in verse 7: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'. *Seek the welfare of the city*. This means active concern and active involvement. It means getting stuck in with no holds barred.

That will have involved people in all sort of different jobs. I imagine most of them will have followed the same sort of occupation in Babylon that they did in Jerusalem. The opening verses of this chapter mention artisans and smiths – craftsmen – as well as prophets, priests and court officials. Each will have had their own distinctive contribution to make in seeking the welfare of the city.

Derek Kidner was a fine Old Testament scholar who studied at Ridley during the war years with John Stott. In his commentary on Jeremiah he says 'God has little use for grudging attitudes. What emerges in verses 5-7 is gloriously positive: a liberation from the paralysing sullenness of inertia and self-pity...' He also points out something I hadn't previously realised, that the word which the NRSV translates 'welfare' is actually the Hebrew word *shalom*. *Shalom* which is often translated peace, but is really a combination of peace and prosperity. Indeed that is how the NIV translates

this verse: 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city'. *Shalom* is a rich word which embraces human wellbeing in a holistic way. Jeremiah says the Jewish exiles should seek *shalom*. They had thought *shalom* was only to be found in their beloved Zion, but now they hear an astonishing counter-intuitive message: seek it in Babylon!

Notice how the prophet tells the exiles to seek *shalom* both for the Babylonians' sakes and for their own: 'pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'. We seek others' good, and we also seek our own good; the two usually belong together. The health of the companies we work for affects the health of society overall. No man is an island, said the poet John Donne. No company is an island. The ripples from what happens in corporate life extend far and wide. And notice the exhortation to *pray*. Peace and prosperity are not something we secure through our own efforts. We need God's help, supplementing and energising and inspiring those efforts.

I like to think that one of the Jewish exiles who heard or read Jeremiah's letter was the young man Daniel. Indeed, I find it hard to understand the audacity of Daniel's career without his sense of having a mandate from a great man of God, which Jeremiah was. For Daniel and his friends Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego, seeking the welfare of Babylon meant being prepared to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's government. (We actually know the three friends by their Babylonian names – Daniel 1:9). Remarkably,

Daniel outlived the Babylonian empire, and saw its overthrow and replacement by the Medo-Persian empire.

Daniel must have been a very old man by the time he had his narrow shave in the lions' den under King Darius. Through much of that time he occupied ministerial office (senior management), holding his own among a world of satraps, sages and sorcerers, who often sought to outwit and oust him. But because Daniel was a man of integrity they could find no grounds for complaint against him, hard though they tried – what a tribute that is.

Daniel got stuck in – make no mistake about it. He retained the sense of being a stranger and exile: the fact that he publicly prayed three times a day with his windows open towards Jerusalem shows that. But he genuinely sought the welfare of Babylon, even the welfare of the roguish and capricious kings he worked for. The book of Daniel makes so much more sense when you realise this letter from the prophet Jeremiah lies behind it.


So here in the Old Testament we have a passage which may not seem to have much to do with business, but is actually enormously relevant. It helps the people of God to locate themselves in relation to the stuff of everyday life. It gives us a brief, a blueprint, for prayerful, active, even passionate involvement. We look forward to the heavenly country, but we still care deeply about our earthly one. And that's why Faith in Business is so important. 

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**Artist's impression
of Babylon at the
time of Jeremiah**