

Our Old Testament Lesson is set in one of the bleakest periods in the history of the Jewish people, the period of Exile in Babylon following the conquest of Judah and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Years earlier the Northern Kingdom of Israel had suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Assyrians. That spelled the end of the Kingdom of Israel not just as a political entity but also as a nation. From then on people talk of the lost tribes of Israel with all sorts of speculation as to where they eventually ended up – including the British Israelite movement that would have us believe that the inhabitants of the British Isles constitute the lost tribe with the singing of that awful hymn Jerusalem.

But Judah was to survive the exile; the people were to return to rebuild the shattered city of Jerusalem – there was to be a new start. That start was to begin in Exile as the exiles struggled with the profound questions posed by the destruction of Jerusalem and in particular the Temple.

Where was God in all this? Had the God in whose sanctuary the Ark of the Covenant had rested in the Temple in Jerusalem himself been defeated by the gods of their conquerors? How, in the words of Psalm 137, do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Without the Temple, without the sacrificial system of that Temple, how were they to live as the People of God in Exile?

Advice, strange, troubling advice comes from Jeremiah in Jerusalem. Settle down, you are there for a long time. But not just that, 'seek the welfare of the city and pray for it; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

This is to be an era of scholarship as much of the present Old Testament Scriptures comes together in its present form. Cut off from Jerusalem and the Temple worship now centres around the Synagogue and the study of the Law.

It is this community that finds its identity in worship and in study that continues in the land of Exile and in time returns in the time of Nehemiah to the city of Jerusalem.

There is something timeless in the advice given to the exiles by Jeremiah and in the response of the exiles that is of relevance to any community of faith. A community of faith does not exist for its own sake – it must have a care and concern for the community in which it is set and contribute to the life of that community. In years gone by Christians have made their contribution in areas of social justice – this week has seen one of the great figures of the late 20th century, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, announcing that he is, finally to take a back seat in the life of his country. In some very dark times he provided what some commentators from both sides of the anti-apartheid struggle described in the last week as a ‘moral beacon’ when South Africa was in dire need of such a beacon.

Such a contribution can only be made out of a strong awareness of our Christian identity, of coming together in worship, of deepening our understanding and participation in our spiritual heritage. Desmond Tutu’s contribution to his country had its roots in his spirituality, his understanding of the scriptures, his participation in the life and worship of the Church and his

unshakeable conviction that God's will for his country was in justice for all, in reconciliation and peace.

May we in our own day and in our own circumstances work and pray for the peace and prosperity of this community in which God has placed us.