

Living "in exile"

By Linda Elliott, Peterborough Quakers

What does it mean to be "in exile"? I think probably all of us are gaining some small insights into what it means in our daily lives at the moment. We are being separated from loved ones, we are restricted as to where we can go and what we can do, there is a sense of danger and threat from "the enemy" - Corona virus - around us. We may not have been sent away from our homes, in fact quite the opposite, but we feel somehow detached and separated from all that feels normal. This sense of dislocation and deep uncertainty is, I think, what it feels like to those who are living in exile.

How do we cope then with this feeling of being "in exile?" I have been focussing this month in my daily readings on the experience of many different people who, for various reasons, have found themselves in exile. One such group were the Jewish community who experienced the devastation of seeing Jerusalem overthrown by the Babylonians and many were captured and forced to live in exile. Their experience as a faith community can, I think, provoke ideas as to how we too might cope with being "in exile" at this present time.

Firstly, the Jewish community were very honest and open about how they felt. There was no pretence. I read again the book of Lamentations which is a deep expression of grief and sorrow at the loss they had experienced. Walter Brueggemann writes, "**Such cathartic utterances are an honest and courageous practice of prayer... These speech practices give us a way to vent our rage at loss without letting it escalate into actions that will hurt others.**" Anger has to go somewhere. We know there is an increase in domestic violence at the moment as frustration boils over in the home. The Jewish community learned to vent their anger and despair towards God. This made me think more deeply about the "safe ways" in which we might deal with our anger at this time of frustration and "exile", to enable us to cope without hurting others.

Secondly, being sent into exile made the Jewish community take a long, hard look how they conducted themselves as a faith community and it made them think about what it meant to **be** "community". Walter Brueggemann writes that the Book of Deuteronomy (a primary document for exiles) "**presents society as a neighbourhood and insists that life must be organised to ensure the well-being of widows, orphans and immigrants. This response to dislocation insists that maintaining a public economy of compassion and justice is a way to move beyond despair.**" In our own situation, it has been heartening to see so many acts of bravery, kindness and compassion being shown by so many people. And this has brought hope and a feeling that we are not alone. This made me think of the many ways we can participate and be a part of being "beacons of hope" in these dark times as a way of helping us cope.

Lastly, during the long years in exile, many Jews lost hope in ever returning home. However, some maintained a sense of conviction that there would be a new future for them. Walter Brueggemann writes ... "**Into this scene stepped the prophet Isaiah offering a radical new possibility. Isaiah invites his community to return home. .. One can almost sense in Isaiah's daring poetry the dancing lightness of a small child, countering the weary soberness of jaded adults who have held the world too long in one position.**" In our own situation, we need to maintain the hope and expectation that life will become sweet again. We know that this "return home" will undoubtedly present many challenges, but it will also present new opportunities because of what has been learned from this time "in exile". This made me think about how focussing on the positive things we can take forward when we are at last out of this crisis, can help us to cope.

