

The Quest for a Place to Live Well

A sermon on Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 by Nathan Nettleton, 13 October 2019

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Message

When God calls us to invest in the places we live, it is a call to active agents of positive change, not compliant patriots.

Sermon

I drove past an [Extinction Rebellion](#) rally on Friday. Lucy, a much loved former member of this congregation, is now one of the organisers of the Fremantle branch, and you'll see her leading the singing at the demonstrations if you find online footage of the actions over there in Perth. Extinction Rebellion's primary demand is that governments tell the truth about the causes of climate change and declare a Climate Emergency so that resources will be properly mobilised to do something about it. At our Baptist Union assembly this coming Friday night, we will be considering a proposal to add the voice of our family of churches to the call for the declaration of a Climate Emergency ([see pages 8-21 in this linked document](#)).

I'm one hundred percent in support of this proposal, and I'm thinking of signing up to become a member of Extinction Rebellion. And yet, as I drove past the rally on Friday, I tried to imagine how I would have responded if instead of being in the park, they had been blocking the intersection at that moment, and I'd been stuck, unable to get through or turn back.

A huge part of Extinction Rebellion's strategy involves inconveniencing ordinary people. It is not that they have anything against ordinary people. It's that their aim is to cause significant disruption to "business as usual", and causing disruption is always going to inconvenience people. And as I realised as I drove past, even as a supporter, my self-interest means that I'm never going to be happy about being personally inconvenienced.

The powers-that-be, governments, police, business, etc, all argue that groups like Extinction Rebellion should be free to express their views, but that they should do it in an orderly way in parks or gardens or stadiums, without disrupting the traffic or business or the activities of ordinary people. That sounds perfectly reasonable, until you ask whether it has been working. There have been peaceful and non-disruptive voices calling for serious action on climate change for decades. It is more than a hundred years since the basic causes of global warming were first identified. People like David Attenborough and Tim Flannery are now saying that their polite and educational approaches to climate activism have flat-out failed.

When really big social changes are needed and there are powerful entrenched interests opposing them, polite, non-disruptive banner waving has a dismal success rate. The big successes like the Civil Right's movement in the US south, the Indian Independence Movement, the toppling of apartheid in South Africa, or the recognition of Indigenous land rights in Australia in the 1970's; these successes only came when the protesters stopped being polite and actually jammed up the gears of business-as-usual until everything ground to a halt and business and government had to begin listening.

It is fascinating to juxtapose the reading we heard tonight from the prophet Jeremiah with this scenario of disruptive radical activism. It is fascinating because it is easy to imagine either side

of the debate quoting it at the other in an attempt to bolster their case. And so it provides us with a good warning of how vested interests can colour our reading, and a good example of the challenge of how to read biblical texts as followers of Jesus.

The reading we heard was, as it said, a letter sent from the prophet in Jerusalem to the Jewish people who had recently been marched off into exile in Babylon. The prophet is addressing the question of how they should be thinking and behaving while living there in exile. And in part it is one side of a conflict between rival prophets delivering opposite messages to the same people.

There is another group of prophets, who Jeremiah regards as false prophets, who are telling the people to keep their walking boots on and their bags packed, ready to march straight back home again. They were saying that there was no need to even think about how to survive or establish themselves in Babylon, because in no time at all God will rescue them and they'll all be going home to Judea. This place is not your home. Don't unpack your suitcases. Be ready to leave soon.

There is, of course, a school of Christian thinking that follows that point of view. This world is not our home. We're just passing through. We're in the world but not of the world, and we're just doing our best to stay separate from this evil world until Jesus returns and carries us all off to our true home in some place better. And sometimes that kind of thinking goes hand in hand with an attitude that regards everything about this physical world as unimportant or even evil, and that can open the door for those who say, "Well, we might as well exploit the planet mercilessly while we're here because God is going to burn it all up soon anyway."

But that school of thought is not our main concern today, because we are listening to Jeremiah's alternative message, and wrestling with the conflicting ways in which that message might be heard and responded to.

Jeremiah's message to the Jewish exiles is quite the opposite. Make yourselves at home, he says. Settle in and establish your lives there in Babylon, because you are going to be there for a long time. It wasn't in the extract we heard tonight, but he tells them that they will be there for seventy years, which with the lifespans of those days was to say that none of you are going to be going home. Your children, or their children, maybe, but not you. This is home now. Get used to it.

Now if that had been all he had said, it still would have left unanswered the question of how they were to live as exiles. Remember, they haven't arrived as willing immigrants, or even as asylum seekers. They have arrived as prisoners of war, forcibly relocated into the land of their enemies, so as to break up the power of their own nation. Surely then the instinct, even if you know it is going to be a long time, would be to be as resistant and uncooperative as possible. Surely you'd be thinking of trying to disrupt business-as-usual and jam up the gears of this enemy society.

But Jeremiah's message is quite the opposite. Invest yourselves in the life of Babylon. Build houses and settle in to them. Plant gardens and live on what they produce. Get married, have children, and let them get married and have children in their turn. Work and pray for the welfare of the city, for your welfare is now bound up with Babylon's welfare.

That's a pretty challenging message to a people who have been marched into exile as prisoners of war. Work and pray for the wellbeing of your enemies, because if things go well for them, things will go well for you.

Not many of us here can relate directly to the experience of being exiled in a land controlled by your oppressors. Uncle Den can because when he was a child, Aboriginal people were not even recognised as citizens here in their own land. And YarZar can because the government of Burma stripped his entire Gurkha ethnic group of citizenship, leaving them stateless in the land of their birth. But I think for the rest of us, this is not an experience we have known.

But as followers of Jesus, some of the questions facing the Jewish exiles still face us. Jesus came proclaiming a new kingdom, and new culture. And the Apostle Paul tells us that our citizenship has been transferred to the Kingdom of God. We are no longer identified primarily by ethnic or national allegiances, but by our allegiance to the kingdom and culture of Jesus. So there is some truth in saying that this world is not our home. How then should we live?

We hear the voice of the prophet addressing us: Invest yourselves in life here. Build houses and settle in to them. Plant gardens and live on what they produce. Get married, have children, and let them get married and have children in their turn. Work and pray for the welfare of this world, for your welfare is now bound up with its welfare.

But does that answer all our questions? Let's think about how it can be heard against the backdrop of this past week of radical disruptive climate activism.

It is not hard to imagine how the authorities who are condemning the disruptions would hear and use the prophet's message. Settle down and be peaceable. Establish normal rhythms of life, and support the cycles of business and prosperity in the city. If you disrupt and damage the business life of the society, everyone will be the loser, including you. Seek instead the health and progress of the economy, because that's what everyone's welfare depends on.

You can certainly read and hear it that way, and that's certainly how the powers-that-be would want you to take it. But is that the way that Jesus would hear and respond to it? Or is there a more Jesusy way?

Well for starters we can ask whether Jesus was seen by the powers-that-be in his day as living by that peaceable and non-disruptive pattern of settled life. He put down roots here sure enough. As it says in the opening of John's gospel, he became flesh and settled in to live among us (John 1:14). But it is pretty clear that both the religious and the political leaders of his day saw him as a thoroughly disruptive element who was very much a threat to business-as-usual and to the existing order of things. So much so that they conspired to have him arrested and executed lest things get out of hand and Rome step in and crush them all.

So how was Jesus interpreting and living the message of Jeremiah, and how might Jesus apply it to the questions raised by the deliberate disruptions of our city in the past week?

Well, I would suggest that Jesus must be reading the idea of seeking the welfare or wellbeing of the place you live in much more active terms. He doesn't seem to be accepting that the way things are, business-as-usual, is necessarily beneficial for the welfare and wellbeing of the

places we live. He was quite prepared to disrupt business-as-usual in order to seek a welfare and wellbeing that the status quo was not producing. In fact, in one of his most dramatic symbolic actions, he closed down the entire temple system for the day along with all its associated small businesses. That's a pretty disruptive form of activism.

Surely too the words of the prophet are just as true of the planet as they are of the city. Seek the welfare of the planet, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare. That reality is becoming more and more obvious even as it becomes more and more desperate. So the prophet's message is to work and pray, and surely to agitate and disrupt if necessary, for the welfare and wellbeing of the planet. But the message is also one of hope. Build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children. Don't drop out, but invest yourselves in all that is good in life, and work and pray and struggle for the changes that will enable the world to be a safe and nurturing home for a good life, long into the future.

Jesus has come among us and made his home in our midst. He settled down amongst a particular people at a particular time, but he was nobody's idea of a flag-waving patriot who said "my country, right or wrong" and stood for the conserving of the way things have always been done around here.

Jesus came among us and made his home in our midst and settled down amongst a particular people and agitated and called them to be the best that they could be, to be what God had created them to be, faithful stewards of the Earth and all that lives in it. Jesus has not given up on this planet and has not given us permission to trash it. And with the words of the prophet, Jesus is calling us to actively seek and pray for the welfare and wellbeing of the planet.

Would Jesus join Extinction Rebellion and disrupt the traffic in the city? I'm not sure. But I'm pretty sure that if he wouldn't, it wouldn't be because he doesn't like being disruptive or because he thought we'd be better leaving the issues to business-as-usual to sort out. Business-as-usual has proved that it can't sort it out, and Jesus has no objection to being disruptive. So if he didn't join Extinction Rebellion, it would probably be because he had something even bigger and more creative and more joyous and more disruptive and more controversial planned!