Jeremiah 29:1-14

So far in Jeremiah there's been loads about the judgment that's coming on Jerusalem. But from chapter 29 on, things change, and through Jeremiah, God starts setting out his vision for Israel's future - and it's a future filled with hope. And chapter 29, which we're going to look at today, contains a brief, one verse summary, of that future. And it's a promise so filled with hope that, if you're a Christian, you almost certainly know it by heart, in fact it's probably stuck on your fridge. And if you're not yet a Christian you should know it, because it tells you something wonderful about who God really is.

But it's the context that this promise is given in that makes it extraordinary. You see, the judgement Jeremiah has been predicting finally fell in 587BC when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. But in the years before that, the Babylonian forces had taken thousands of Israelites into exile - people like Daniel who you read about in the book of Daniel.

And those Jewish exiles were now living in the city of Babylon: a city that was deeply pagan, and pluralistic, hundreds of miles from home. Hundreds of miles from everything that was familiar to them. And put yourself in their shoes. Because now they've got to live in a city, in a society that thinks its gods have defeated your God, that thinks your god is powerless. That thinks of you as a loser - or at least as defeated. A culture that's profoundly opposed to your faith.

But that's what's interesting isn't it? Because that's the situation you live in today. We live in an age when our culture thinks that their gods - the gods of science and rationalism and pluralism - have defeated the God of the Bible; a culture that increasingly thinks of Christians as losers or at least as defeated; a culture that's increasingly contrary to Christian faith.

But it was to just such a community, to these exiles in Babylon that Jeremiah wrote a letter. And what he says in that letter has a huge amount to say to us.

Jeremiah 29:1-14

So we're going to look at four things: firstly, serving the city; secondly withdrawing from and criticising the city; thirdly using the city, and fourthly God's promise in the city.

Serving the City

Look at v1, 'These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to *the surviving elders* of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar has taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.'

And that gives you a glimpse alone of what these exiles were up against. Jeremiah's writing to the *surviving* elders. In other words, the elders who didn't die on the long march through the desert from Jerusalem to Babylon, or who hadn't been executed by the Babylonians. In other words, the y were now under the power of an empire that could be brutal - especially to those who opposed it. But it also tells us, as does v2, with its list of the king and queen mother, and officials and skilled craftsmen, that Babylon has taken the educated and the elite into exile.

But that was what they always did for any nation that conquered. But why did they do that, do you think? Well, it was to indoctrinate them - to assimilate them into the Babylonian system, to re-educate them so that they would begin to think and live like Babylonians.

Now, given that was the situation these exiles found themselves in, what would you expect Jeremiah to say to them? 'Listen, Jewish exiles, the city of Babylon is filled with idols, they've destroyed our land, so have nothing to do with those people. Keep yourself as separate from them as possible. And stay hostile to them.'

But that's not what he says, is it? In fact he says four things.

Firstly, they are to ***settle in the city***. Verse 5, 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.' Now, when Su and I go on holiday, Su immediately unpacks her suitcase and folds all her clothes up neatly in the wardrobe. Whereas I spend the next however many days bent over, rummaging around in my suitcase, tripping over the clothes spilling out onto the floor. I never quite get round to unpacking.

But God is saying to them: Unpack your bags. Make Babylon - this pagan city - your home. Don't keep your bags packed, ready to go. Take up residence.

Babylon was to be their home. But not their ultimate home. Look at v10: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you… and bring you back to this place' - to Jerusalem. So they're to take up residence - whilst all the time knowing, Babylon's not our final destination. They're to see themselves as resident aliens. Citizens of one country making their home in another.

Which, if you think about it, is what many of us are here in Switzerland. But the apostle Peter says it's what all of us are as Christians. In 1 Peter 2:11 he calls us 'sojourners and exiles.' And the writer to the Hebrews says 'For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come' (Heb 13:14). In other words, the place where you live and study and work is your home, it's Babylon, so unpack your bags, but it's not your ultimate home, and you're to live wherever God places you, as a citizen of another city. And it's the culture and the values of that other city, that should define how you live in this one.

But then he says, ***multiply in the city***. Verse 6, 'Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage… multiply there, and do not decrease.' Now the danger, when you live in Babylon, is that you assimilate, you go native, you become indistinguishable from those around you. Which is exactly what Babylon *then* wanted. But it's also exactly what our current culture wants for you. Whether it's through advertising, or education, or the culture in your school, or on campus or in your workplace - the message is, become like us. And God is saying, don't be consumed by the surrounding culture, don't lose your identity as my people, do the opposite - multiply there.

But then, thirdly he says, v7, '***seek the welfare of the city*** where I have sent you into exile.' And that word *welfare* is the Hebrew word, *shalom*. It's the all-encompassing peace, the sense of well-being, of blessedness, of life coming together and all being well with the world, and your life being right with God. And the suggestion that these exiles should seek that for Babylon would have totally upended them. I mean, listen to the words of Psalm 137, written around the time of this exile. Verses 8-9, 'O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you

with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.'

The people Jeremiah is writing to had witnessed their own children, their loved ones, being murdered by the Babylonians, and they longed for justice. So, 'Seek the shalom of this city? No way! We want them people to do to them what they did to us.'

But God is saying, 'you're my people, called to be a blessing to the nations, and you're to seek, you're to work for, the flourishing, the welfare, the shalom of these people. And v7, 'for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'

You see, you'll never find the good that God wants you to experience by seeking it for yourself first, or by holding on to bitterness. You find it by seeking it for those whom God has put you amongst.

But then, God says, ***pray for the city***. Verse 7, 'pray to the Lord on its behalf.' Now, Psalm 122:6 called the people to 'pray for the peace [*the shalom*] of Jerusalem.' And that's what these exiles would have expected Jeremiah to say, isn't it: 'You're in Babylon, the capital city of our enemy who's crushing Jerusalem, so pray for Jerusalem.' But instead, God says, pray for Babylon, pray for their welfare.

And Jesus said, 'love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt 5:44). You see, it's hard to hate, it's hard to hold on to bitterness, when you're praying for God's blessing on the life of the person who's mocking you at school, or opposing you at work, or criticising you on campus, isn't it?

You see, just like these 6th century Jews, you're the citizen of another city. You're a resident alien. And God has placed you in *this* city - in your school, or on campus, or in your business, or in your neighbourhood, not to be consumed by the culture, but to seek and pray for the welfare, the common good, of those around you.

In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, the American Sociologist, Rodney Stark, who's an agnostic, tried to get to grips with why Christianity flourished in 1st and 2nd century Roman culture, when the odds were so stacked against it. And what he found was that when plagues and pandemics hit, while other people fled the cities, Christians stayed and cared for the sick. That women were valued more highly by Christians than pagans, and that infanticide, the killing of babies, which always targets girls more than boys, was prohibited. That Christianity triumphed over paganism because it fundamentally improved the quality of life of those it served.

Listen to what he said: 'In response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world' Christianity served as a revitalisation movement. 'To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments… to cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to citizens faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered… service.'

Now, that doesn't tell the whole story by a long way. But his point's clear isn't it? How did Christianity flourish in pagan cities? By seeking the shalom of the city.

But there are alternatives, aren't there… and to be honest, they're a lot easier.

Withdrawing from and Criticising the City
Look at v8, 'For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.'

So, over in Babylon, there are people, false prophets, saying the opposite of what Jeremiah's saying: 'this exile's going to be short, and God's going to get us out of here in no time. So don't unpack. Don't settle in the city. Don't make this your home - stay in your ghetto, and above all, don't seek the city's welfare, stay hostile to it.'

You see, if one danger of living in a pagan culture is to be conformed to it, another is that you withdraw from it. You retreat. You stand on the side-lines and point out all that's wrong with it, and lob hand grenades at it.

But it's way easier to do that, isn't it, than face the opposition that might come your way as you try and and stay and influence a culture, and bring shalom. A friend of ours is a school teacher, and she recently faced the prospect of being the only member of staff, at a training event, to speak up for Christian sexual ethics, in a setting that potentially exposed her to the criticism of others. And if you're not a street-fighter, and our friend isn't, that's hard, isn't it? It would be much easier to assimilate and go along with what everyone else says, and just keep your head down, or go and get a job at a Christian school where everyone thinks the same as you. It's much harder to stay and pray and seek the welfare of the unbelievers God has put you amongst.

ok, but there's yet another alternative. Rather than conforming to the city or withdrawing from it, instead of seeking its welfare you can use it.

Using the City
In a recent article in Public Discourse, one writer said that our current political, cultural, and educational elites have produced a culture where we can 'self-create as self-indulgent consumers and pleasure-seekers. *From advertising to academia,'* he writes, *'desire is glorified.'* And quoting another writer he says, I was 'taught that "I should do what I loved, and I could love whatever I liked."'

In other words, life is about being who you want to be and getting what you want, and *what* you want can be whatever you want it to be. The important thing is *you want it*.

And the problem is that you can have that attitude towards your studies or your work or your leisure time. Instead of seeking the welfare of the city, we take from it. And we can view the city - the university, the company you work for, this region with all its sporting opportunities, as the means for getting what you want: to make money or to make you; because now you've got EPFL, or some multinational, or whatever on your resumé, and the city's about advance your career, or furthering your reputation. And then what we do is we live like a tourist, enjoying the life the city offers - soaking up the wine bars; sampling the night life, doing sports, but the shalom of the city - the wellbeing of campus, or your business park, or your neighbourhood, doesn't really feature.

But God says, it's in the welfare of the city that you'll find your welfare. It's when you work for the thriving of those around you that you really begin to thrive.

Ok, so, how can we do it? You don't want to assimilate and lose your identity in a pagan culture; and you don't want to stand off and criticise; and you don't want to use it for what you can get. But how can you settle and seek and pray for the welfare of the city?

God's Promise in the City

And Jeremiah gives us three things that can can help us do this. You see, in v1 it says that Nebuchadnezzar had taken these Jewish people into exile, but then, three times, the Lord says, *I brought you here*. Verse 4, 'to all the exiles *whom I have sent into exile* from Jerusalem to Babylon'. Verse 7, 'Seek the welfare of the city *where I have sent you into exile*.' Verse 14, 'I will bring you back to the place from which *I sent you* into exile.'

In other words, they aren't in Babylon by accident. They're not even there because Nebuchadnezzar wants to conquer the world. They're in this pagan, pluralistic city because God has sent them. And you and I can work for the welfare of those around us when we understand the same.

You see, in Acts 17, Paul said, God 'made from one man every nation of mankind to live in all the face of the earth, *having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.*' In other words, God puts you where he wants you. And like these exiles in Babylon, you're not where you are now by accident, God has sent you here, he's put you in your school, or on campus, or in your company. You're there by his appointment - as his ambassador.

But then, look at that famous promise in v11: 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare [literally, for shalom] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.'

Now, you've seen those calendars with beautiful views of mountains and rivers and some wonderful Bible verse on them, haven't you? Naomi, one of my daughters, has even made some. And we've joked about making an alternative version: beautiful pictures with the kind of Bible verses that never get a look in, like Leviticus 13:30, 'it is an itch'. Or Leviticus 3:16, 'all fat is the Lord's'. But they'd never sell!

But Jeremiah 29:11 definitely sells, doesn't it. I mean, how many of you have you got up while it's still dark and watched the sun come up over the mountains? The night is black. But then it gets ever so slightly lighter, and lighter, and then you watch as the first sunbeam shoots over the mountain top, and then the sun begins to rise. And this is God promising that Israel's long night of suffering is coming to an end, and dawn is coming and the sun's going to rise. That however difficult things might be in Babylon, however much it might seem like life is not going the way they wanted, God's ultimate plan is for something way better. That in all the difficulties of trying to live faithfully and bring shalom, God knows what he's doing. He's got them in his hands. And he's going to see them home.

And if that is true for them, how much more true is it for you, this side of Jesus. Because if this is the promise of a new dawn, the first glimmer of dawn began when they were allowed back to Jerusalem 70 years later, but it was when Christ came that the sunbeam pierced the night.

And Jesus came from the true Jerusalem, from the heavenly city, and he left the safety of his world to enter ours. And he moved into our city, and took up residence in our neighbourhood. And rather than standing on the sidelines, criticising, he sought our welfare. And rather than using us for his own ends, he gave himself for our shalom. And at the cross he knew no peace, that in him we might find peace. And if seeking the welfare of those around us might cost us, look what seeking our welfare cost him. But he didn't give himself grudgingly, he gave himself willingly, because he loves us.

And today, maybe you feel like these exiles in Babylon. Maybe life is not how you imagined it would be. Maybe your plans haven't worked out like you wanted. And you wonder, does God really love me, are his plans for me really good? Well, look at Christ dying for you. Look at him rising again and triumphing over your enemies, and know he didn't just seek your welfare, he secured it. And his plans for you are always good, and he will see you home.

But that doesn't mean you won't experience hardship along the way, or find working for the welfare of others easy. But that's the third reason Jeremiah gives us for why we can do it. Look at v12-13: 'Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.'

You see, this whole experience of living in this pagan city and seeking its welfare, wasn't to destroy Israel, it was to purify her, and renew her, and lead her into a deeper relationship with God. And that tells you that it's precisely through difficulties and trials that God draws his people closer to him. Including, the difficulty of living in a pagan, pluralistic culture.

Because in their welfare is your welfare. So, as you welcome international students, or work among the refugees; as you study or work for excellence while helping to further those around you; as you create a distinctive but not exclusive culture with your Christian friends, and invite others in; maybe, guys, in the way you speak of and treat the women around you; as you seek to serve on your commune's municipalité, if you're Swiss, or your kids' school PTA; and above all, as you tell people about Christ, who left the safety of his city to come to ours, to seek our welfare, you can work for the welfare of others. And as you do, your prayer life will become richer, your faith will deepen, and your love for God and others will grow.