

Settling in Babylon

Wigs and Mitres Service, Lincoln's Inn Chapel (12th October 25)

Bible readings: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7 ; Luke 17:11-19

Opening Prayer

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!

O calm of hills above,

where Jesus knelt to share with Thee

the silence of eternity,

interpreted by love! Amen

There are times when the Word of God refuses to give us comfort and instead gives us truth. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles is one such word.

Dragged from Jerusalem to Babylon; displaced, defeated, disoriented, the people dream of going home. They long for normality, stability, the restoration of what was lost.

But the word of the Lord through Jeremiah cuts across nostalgia and despair:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile."

Babylon, symbol of empire, of domination and assimilation, is not home. Yet astonishingly, it is where God calls God's people to live faithfully.

To "settle in Babylon" is not to surrender to it. It is to *bear witness to another kingdom within it*. To refuse despair while resisting assimilation. To build without belonging.

The challenge of Babylon

Babylon's genius is twofold: subjugation and assimilation. It conquers bodies, and then seeks to colonise minds. It tells the exiles: *forget your songs, learn ours; forget your story, take ours*.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that exile is not just a place of displacement; it is where empire tries to *monopolise imagination*. Babylon tells us what is normal, what is possible, what is acceptable. It whispers that the powerful set the terms of justice, that truth is negotiable, that compassion must bow to convenience.

And so it is in every age; including our own.

In Britain's public life, whether in the courtroom, the chamber, or the church, the temptation is not to bow to idols of gold, but to the subtler idols of neutrality, efficiency, and control.

For those of us who wear wigs or mitres, Babylon's whisper is this: *be pragmatic, not prophetic; be reasonable, not righteous; be effective, not faithful*.

The call of God from paranoia to metanoia

But Jeremiah's astonishing word is that *God is in Babylon too*.

Not as an apologist for empire, but as the one who *sends*, who calls the exiles not to return, but to *reorient*.

“Seek the welfare of the city,” says the Lord. In Hebrew, the word is *shalom*-peace, wholeness, right relationship. God’s command is not a call to nostalgia but to metanoia, to *teshuva* (in Hebrew), the turning of the heart toward God in the midst of exile.

And nostalgia, we are reminded, has amnesia as her twin sister. Together, they bind us into a constricted version of the past that locks us out of a hope-shaped future where belonging is not articulated around exclusivist and colonising narratives.

This is not about going back to Jerusalem; it’s about discovering God *afresh* in Babylon. It’s the difference between paranoia, the anxious grasping to preserve identity, and metanoia, the courageous turning toward God’s newness.

Metanoia is the essence of the prophetic call: a reorientation of the moral and spiritual imagination. It is God’s invitation to live differently in the very system that seeks to shape us. To think new thoughts, to feel new compassion, to build a different kind of belonging.

Howard Thurman once wrote that the contradictions of life are “not final.” Faithfulness in Babylon is precisely that refusal to let the contradictions be the last word.

Faithfulness at the border; the place where God dwells

And that is where Luke’s Gospel meets Jeremiah’s letter.

Jesus walks the border between Samaria and Galilee, between inclusion and exclusion, purity and contamination. It is what the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep calls a liminal space, a threshold; that move us from what has been, through a middle place of uncertainty, toward what will be. It is a place both tender and creative, where ordinary structures loosen and new ways of being can emerge.

And it is there, at the edges, that divine grace breaks in. In Scripture, God’s transforming work is often found at the edges: Hagar in the wilderness, Moses before the burning bush, the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The margins are not places of absence, but of encounter.

Ten lepers call out for mercy. They are healed, but only one returns. A Samaritan. A foreigner.

The one who returns understands what the others do not: that healing is not complete without gratitude; that faith, that *shalom* is not a transaction, but a relationship. In that act of thanksgiving, the Samaritan crosses another threshold, from healing to wholeness, from isolation to communion. Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” It is at the *edges*, the borderlands of belonging, that God’s newness erupts.

From Abraham leaving home, to Moses in Midian, to Jesus between Samaria and Galilee, God does God’s best work in the in-between.

Liminal spaces are holy spaces. They are uncomfortable, but creative. They are where the old order loosens its grip and something of the Kingdom of God begins to take shape.

Many of us here today live at such borders; where law meets compassion, where power meets conscience, where judgment meets mercy. Those are the sacred thresholds where God's justice must take flesh.

A garden in the unlikely place

Some years ago, in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Mosul, aid workers noticed a remarkable thing. Amidst the dust and desolation, a group of displaced women had begun to plant flowers; tiny splashes of green and red beside their makeshift tents. When asked why, one woman said: "We cannot go home, but we can make this place human."

That is Jeremiah's letter made visible. *Build houses. Plant gardens. Seek the welfare of the city.*

Even here. Even now.

To settle in Babylon is to plant something that refuses despair. It is to act as though God's new world is possible, even when all evidence suggests otherwise.

Our Babylon

Lincoln's Inn stands at a crossroads of law, morality, and imagination. The very architecture around us, these courts, these cloisters, carry the memory of a nation wrestling with justice.

But Babylon still beckons: the bureaucratic cynicism that hollows out vocation; the temptation to reduce justice to procedure; the slow corrosion of moral courage under the acid of public pressure.

To settle in Babylon, for you who interpret law and those who proclaim grace, is to resist cynicism with imagination. It is to remember, as the maxim suggests, that law without compassion becomes cruelty; that order without mercy becomes oppression; that truth without humility becomes tyranny.

We are called, each in our domain, to be midwives of *shalom* in the city. To work for justice not as mere compliance, but as vocation; not as self-preservation, but as participation in God's healing work.

Planting hope in exile

To settle in Babylon is not to give up on Jerusalem. It is to discover that even here, *God is already at work*. Incidentally, it is in exile that the people learn a new nomenclature of the divine. Unlike ancient near-eastern traditions, God's activity and reach are no longer restricted to geographic boundaries; not merely the Lord of Jerusalem, but the Lord of the whole universe, including Babylon.

So plant your gardens.
Speak your truth.
Render judgment with mercy.
Build houses of hope.

For God is in this city, not only in the cathedral or the court, but in every act of integrity that resists the empire of cynicism.
The exiles found that when they sought the city's welfare, they found their own.
And the Samaritan found that when he turned back in gratitude, he was made whole.

So may we, in our own Babylon, seek *shalom* with courage and imagination, turning
from paranoia to *metanoia*,
from self-preservation to divine participation,
from exile to hope.
And may we, even in this strange land, never stop singing the Lord's song.
Amen.