

Saturday March 20

Jeremiah 29:4-14 – Keep serving

4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

8 Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.

10 This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.

11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

14 I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Please think with me once again of Psalm 137, that howl of pain from people hundreds of miles from their home in Israel, exiled in a foreign land and mocked by their captors. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept”. If you can begin to imagine their situation, you can see how they would be longing to get home again at the first opportunity: when, when, O when? And some of their religious leaders were there, exiled with them. What, you may ask, were they saying to their people? One of them was the prophet Jeremiah. He listened to what his colleagues were saying: just hang in there, folks, it won't be long and we'll all be on the way back! That's what Jeremiah chapter 29 tells us.

It also tells us what God told Jeremiah to tell them. Two things: firstly, *don't* listen to this stuff. Secondly, 70 years. Yes, you heard right: 70 years. That's how long you're going to be here. So make the best of it. That's not *exactly* what God told Jeremiah to say. What Jeremiah said was this: “... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

PERSEVERANCE is once again the name of the game. In other words, instead of sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves, there are things to be done. But there are voices around us telling us it's right to feel sorry for ourselves. Last October, a former senior minister in the Westminster government accused the current cabinet of “giving in” to scientific and medical leaders who were urging a second national lockdown, which came into place after a delay which took an appalling toll on hospitals and on bereaved families. Businesses that had to close were, some said, “being punished”, that their city, or area, or business had been “picked on”. Let's not minimize the pain that people who run businesses have gone through. But when this sort of language encourages us all to feel sorry for ourselves, it becomes difficult to rouse ourselves to action.

Listen again to those words of Jeremiah: “... seek the peace and prosperity of the city ... Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” There are things that many of us can be doing to be a

blessing to others at this time; you might feel that your own contribution is going to be so small as to be insignificant. But I doubt that others would see it that way. It's what we all put in together when we persevere that makes the difference.