

Easter Five: Exiles in our own country

One of the many ways that the early church was so different to us, is that they were a vulnerable minority and from very early days they were at risk of persecution and martyrdom as we hear from the Acts of the Apostles and the death of Stephen.

We may feel like a minority sometimes but we, in the West at least, live in a country informed by Christian values that are embedded in our laws, public holidays, goals and cultural practices. While we might be part of the minority that hold a personal faith conviction and attend church we are scarcely a minority group in any conventional sense of the word. We do know that this is not true for everyone around the world and that there are still people who are persecuted for their Christian faith.

But this is part of the context of our readings this morning – being a minority group for whom some at least risked persecution. Which goes part of the way maybe to explaining this uneasy relationship with the world. The Acts of the Apostles describe the ultimate cost that some were called upon to pay for their faith. And the advice of Peter to submit to the rules of the day may in part have been advice on how to belong to the community of which one was a part so as not to draw unnecessary attention to oneself. And then we have the reassurance of the gospel that we have another ultimate and eternal home. A reassurance for all of us but particularly important for those who lived in such vulnerable situations.

In a sense our forebears in faith lived between the world that was and the world to come. And so do we. In less dramatic and risky ways maybe but we too live between the conventions and demands of the life we share with every other member of our society and the kingdom life into which we are called. For I do not believe we do the gospel justice if we hear that there are many rooms in our Father's house as only a promise of our address after death! Rather we are called into intimate fellowship or living arrangements with God here and now. We are called into a life style and an orientation in life that is toward the kingdom or the reign of God, now. We are called into the world into which we are born and the world into which we are baptised.

And that dual membership makes us deeply at home in the world as fellow creatures and citizens and also "not at home". Or as St Augustine said "we are restless until we are at rest in you."

And this restlessness makes us in some ways exiles in our own communities, just as our forebears were exiles in Babylon and then after the dispersion of the Jews and first Christians after the razing of the Temple in Jerusalem.

A contemporary writer has written a wonderful book on this matter called "Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post Christian Culture" which while rather wordy does explain why we feel both at home and not at home in our contemporary society. He emphasises that it is important that we spend some of our time in the company of others who believe as we do as well as belonging and participating in our broader community.

In talking about how to be missionary in the general community he certainly has plenty of models and points but he begins with a beautiful image. "If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs and organise the work: teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean." And then, when they have the yearning for the ocean, there will be a readiness for the work of building a ship.

Often the church talks about mission – getting more bums on pews, and doing good works far away - as another duty or chore that we have. Maybe there is a wisdom in suggesting that we need first to find our yearning for the ocean, our yearning for belonging to a community that is orientated toward the kingdom of God, and then together finding a way of making that come true.

So as we allow ourselves to feel the restlessness that many of us do, maybe we can be compassionate toward those who also feel restless, not quite at home in their lives, and do not know why. We can share out of our common humanity and also out of the Emaus Road experience that there is one who sets our hearts on fire, there is a relationship in which we feel deeply at home, there is a path in life which while not denying the difficulties and struggle has a secure and certain hope in the travelling companion we find ourselves walking with, and that we have a dwelling place that is no less than the bosom of God.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.