

The situation we live in seems to get no easier and we wonder where and when it will all end. However, we are urged today to consider how we can make the most of the situation in which we find ourselves and to trust that the Lord has plans for us that will ultimately bring us to a place of peace and wellbeing.

Song

Come, people of the risen King, who delight to bring him praise.
Come, all and tune your hearts to sing to the morning star of grace.
From the shifting shadows of the earth we will lift our eyes to him,
Where steady arms of mercy reach to gather children in.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!

One heart, one voice, O church of Christ, rejoice!

Come, those whose joy is morning sun, and those weeping through the night.
Come, those who tell of battles won, and those struggling in the fight.
For his perfect love will never change and his mercies never cease,
But follow us through all our days with the certain hope of peace.

Come, young and old from every land, men and women of the faith.
Come, those with full or empty hands, find the riches of his grace.
Over all the world his people sing - shore to shore we hear them call
The truth that cries through every age: 'Our God is all in all!'

StF 2249 Keith & Kristyn Getty and Stuart Townend © 2007 Thankyou Music

Prayer

In Psalm 137 verse 4 the psalmist asks the question on the lips of the Israelites while they are exiled in Babylon, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

Lord we long to praise and worship you and yet even now the context in which we do this seems so strange to us. Help us to remember that whatever else may change you remain the same. We thank you that we can come to you just as we are and find a place of refuge and strength. We thank you that when the going gets tough and we're not sure how to carry on, we have the wonderful invitation from Jesus 'Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest'. Thank you Holy Spirit that even when we are not aware of you, you are with us, lifting our spirits and calming our minds, guiding us into the peace that comes from knowing we are held by God's loving hand.

We are sorry for the times when we become despondent, failing to trust that you have plans for us that are for our good and not for harm. We are sorry for the times we take out our anxiety and frustration on those around us, becoming impatient and speaking words that are unkind and unloving. Forgive us for all the times when we have behaved in ways that seek only our own satisfaction. We thank you for the gracious words of Jesus to all who come to him in repentance, 'Your sins are forgiven'. Help us, by your Spirit at work in us, to take hold of this opportunity for a fresh start and to acknowledge you truly as Lord of our lives. Open our minds and hearts to learn more of you and to draw closer to you in our worship. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

Reading: Jeremiah 29:4-14 NLT

4 This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem. **5** "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens,

and eat the food they produce. **6** Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! **7** And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

8 This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you. Do not listen to their dreams, **9** because they are telling you lies in my name. I have not sent them,” says the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: “You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again.

11 For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. **12** In those days when you pray, I will listen. **13** If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. **14** I will be found by you,” says the Lord. “I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land.”

Sermon

It is now six months since I wrote a message for St John’s newsletter in which I quoted some of these words from the prophet Jeremiah in an attempt to offer reassurance and hope. At that point the church building had been closed for some eight weeks and there was, understandably, some anxiety around the fact that this was going on longer than we had hoped, and a desire to ‘get back to normal’. It is two and a half thousand years since Jeremiah wrote this letter to God’s people who were in exile in Babylon, and yet there are so many echoes with our current situation that I can’t help thinking God wants to say some of these same things to us again today. The Israelites, all those years ago thought that their exile would be over quickly and they longed to return to their own land and ‘get on’ with their lives. Jeremiah tells them not to be fooled by the false-prophets who tell them what they want to hear, and says, ‘It might not be over as quickly as you’d like, but in the midst of this frustrating and uncomfortable situation there is hope. God has plans for you that are good’. We need to hear that now don’t we, as weeks have turned into months and the end is still not in sight. It seems that we are running out of steam as we continue to face the fear, boredom, anxiety and loneliness in this strange and threatening land in which we find ourselves. We are weary and frustrated and uncomfortable as our plans have been postponed or cancelled and the light at the end of the tunnel is growing rather dim. This is particularly tough and stressful when so many of the sources from which we would normally draw reassurance and sustenance are just not available to us – singing together in church, seeing friends and family, reaching out for a hug or a handshake, sharing our concerns over a cup of coffee – no wonder we long for this time to end. And yet these days are precious and we should try to resist the temptation to simply wish them away. I probably feel this particularly at the moment as I’ve just reached 60 and realise that it’s easier to mark my life in decades rather than individual years – this earthly life will not last forever – we do not have unlimited time to get round to doing what God wants us to do. The first few verses of today’s reading are instructions to the exiles to accept and make the most of their current situation. ‘Build homes, and plan to stay... work for the peace and prosperity of the city..’ I don’t know who first coined the phrase ‘Bloom where you are planted’ – it’s not actually a scriptural quote but it certainly resonates with these instructions and with others in the Bible, which urge us to be content where God has placed us in life and to make the most of the opportunities we have, whether or not the situation is of our choosing. We are urged also to seek ‘peace and prosperity’ for those around us. Those words peace and prosperity are an attempt to describe ‘shalom’ - the complete peace, wellbeing, blessing and love that cannot be adequately covered by a single word in

the English language. So we are to have an impact in our community to work for the shalom of those around us. Our sphere of influence may seem rather limited at the moment but don't let that put you off – I can think of a great example in our local ALDI store. There is a young man who can often be found working at the checkout and you can tell which till he is on well before you can see him. He is always cheerful, patient, polite and respectful and his attitude lifts the mood of those around him to the extent that there is a real buzz and even the welcome sound of laughter as the positive interactions ripple out amongst others nearby. You may not even be able to leave your home just now, but a friendly phone call to someone who is lonely, or maybe a card to remind someone they are in your thoughts, can have a similar effect, helping to build the sense of wellbeing and peace that God tells us to work for.

Bloom where you are planted – make every attempt to flourish where you are and play your part in encouraging others to flourish too.

Another very important way of making the most of this time of waiting and frustration is to cultivate our relationship with God so that too may bloom and flourish even despite our current situation. Jeremiah exhorts the people to seek God saying 'God has plans for you that are good'. He also tells them that God himself says '...when you pray I will listen. If you seek me with your whole heart you will find me'. All this despite them being away from the temple which they had previously considered to be the place they needed to go to find God. Seek God in your present circumstance and you will find him.

It seems that we've come to a point where we almost overwhelmed by so many concerns and uncertainties – concerns about the economic climate, risks to our health and that of our families, risks to our relationships, threats to our security – where will it end? What can we do? I think there is only one helpful response we can each make in such dire circumstances and that is to give up, to resign as general manager of the universe and hand the responsibility over to God. The more we can do that, the more we will learn from experience that we can trust God and to know that, even in the most disappointing and difficult circumstances, we can have hope. Hope that comes from the promise that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has prepared for all those who will accept it, a future for good and not for harm, a future in which we will know true shalom.

When we start to get despondent it helps to remember that God sees the whole picture in a way we are just not able to, and that he plans from that perspective. The well-known poem, 'The Weaver' expresses this so well. It was written in the last century by Grant Colfax Tullar, an American minister and hymn writer, and made popular when quoted by Corrie Ten Boom whose experience during the holocaust must surely have made this incredibly poignant.

"My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me.
I cannot choose the colours
He weaveth steadily.

Oft' times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.

Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly

Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned

He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him."

I close with the words of God from Jeremiah 29:11-14 expressed by Eugene Peterson in The Message. God says, 'I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out – plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed'.

Prayer

God we know that you want us to 'bloom where we are planted', to take hold of the opportunities we have each day, whatever our situation, and to work to deepen our relationship with you and to build the peace and wellbeing of those around us. You know how difficult we find this sometimes when fears and limitations sap our energy and stifle our vision of what might be. Help us at such times to recognise that you are at work through it all and to put our trust in you, knowing that you have plans for our future - plans that are good. Lord we lift to you those whose physical and mental wellbeing are at a low ebb just now. For those who are ill we ask for healing and strength. For those who are losing hope we ask that you would bring light into their dark thoughts and hope into their spirits. For those who are anxious and fearful would you bring reassurance and peace. For those who mourn the loss of loved ones and those who are in sorrow for the sheer amount of pain and loss in the world would you bring comfort and the assurance that you are aware of all things and that your plans are ultimately for the good of all you have made. There are people and situations that are of particular concern for us today and we lift them to you now in the quietness of our hearts.....

Loving God please would you bring healing and strength, light and hope, reassurance and peace, comfort and the assurance of your loving care to all those we have named before you in these moments.

Lord we long to grow in our understanding of you and also to share the wonderful knowledge of your love with those around us. We pray that you would bless those who are engaging with Alpha online. We thank you for them and ask that they might come to know the peace and hope that you offer to all who trust in you.

Heavenly Father, as we seek to serve and worship you through these strange times we ask that you would free us all from the threat and consequences of the coronavirus. Please protect and encourage those who work to care for others during this time and help us to find a way through the social and economic chaos that affects so many.

We pray Lord that we might all be renewed in hope and reminded of your words spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out - plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen'. And so we offer you these prayers in the confidence that you do hear us and that you do care for all you have made. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

Song

There is a hope that burns within my heart, that gives me strength for every passing day;
A glimpse of glory now revealed in meagre part, yet drives all doubt away.
I stand in Christ, with sins forgiven; And Christ in me, the hope of heaven!
My highest calling and my deepest joy, to make his will my home.

There is a hope that lifts my weary head, a consolation strong against despair,
That when the world has plunged me in its deepest pit, I find the Saviour there!
Through present sufferings, future's fear, He whispers, 'Courage!' in my ear.
For I am safe in everlasting arms, and they will lead me home.

There is a hope that stands the test of time, that lifts my eyes beyond the beckoning grave,
To see the matchless beauty of a day divine when I behold his face!
When sufferings cease and sorrows die, and every longing satisfied.
Then joy unspeakable will flood my soul, for I am truly home.

SoF 2558 Stuart Townend & Mark Edwards © 2007 Thankyou Music

Blessing

Whatever today may hold, whatever tomorrow might bring, the future is secure, for Christ is with us, the same yesterday, today and for ever. 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 4:6-7) Amen