

A THRIVING CITY

A sermon on Jeremiah 29:4-7

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God has placed us among people, in a town or village, in his world. And I want to be involved in that neighbourhood, that town, that world. But can I be of significance for my community? Can I really make a difference? And yet ... I do not want to live in isolation.

A text that has inspired many, is Jeremiah 29:7: *Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.*

Jeremiah 29:7 is an important text for the Rev. Tim Keller in New York as well. It stimulates him and his church to go on putting the beautiful words of the gospel into action, and looking for ways in which the many rotten places in that big city can thrive. He wrote somewhere: *'Your citizenship in the city of God makes you the very best citizen in the city of man'*.

Maybe you wonder if dedicating yourself to working for the welfare of your city really helps. If it will even be noticed.

And yet: go on praying, go on trying!

1. Exiles in a broken world

Seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the LORD on its behalf.

The Israelites in exile were the first people to hear these words. Did they also think that this text was inspiring? To be honest, that remains to be seen...

It is ± 600 years before Christ. The people of Israel have sinned long and hard.

They have silenced critical prophets. Then God's patience runs out. He punishes the people of Israel heavily. They have to go into exile in Babylon, thousands of miles from home.

But once they are there, other self-appointed prophets present themselves.

They say: *'Just a little while longer, and we will go back to Israel.'*

Then the prophet Jeremiah writes a letter from Jerusalem. It is a letter to the exiles, on God's behalf. The essence of that letter is: *Folks, you will not go back soon.*

Indeed, you will have to wait 70 years before you return!

That means that none of the readers of the letter will live to see the return to Israel themselves.

That is bad news.

In Jeremiah's letter the Israelite exiles are given two orders:

- Make a good life for yourself, build a house, plant a garden, start a family.
- Seek the welfare of the city in which you live.

Is this an inspiring order? On the contrary, for the Israelites it is a shocking text. Praying for Babylon, praying for the destroyer of the temple, making a life in that foreign land... it must have sounded like high treason and blasphemy.

But it isn't treason at all! Because that letter also includes verse 11. God says: *'I have plans for your welfare, to give you a future and a hope.'* The exile is part of God's plan for the future of Israel. Right through the suffering of the exiles, God is building a new future for Israel. Therefore God wants the Israelites themselves to start building new lives as well.

As God's people, Israel lives among others that don't want anything to do with God. In this respect the situation of Israel in exile resembles the position of the church in this world.

But there is also quite a difference between then and now.

Israel in Babylon: that was a judgment, God's punishment.

We can't say that about the church in the Netherlands!

Our situation is not one of punishment, but rather of judgment being postponed. God delays sending the Judge of this world, so that many more people may come to know Jesus Christ.

We do not live under God's judgment, but under his patient love.

And yet, we are also exiles. We are people that have been dismissed from paradise. We live as sinners in a sinful, broken world. And God has withdrawn behind the scenes. For us, there is a future country that we can as yet only dream of and pray for: *Your kingdom come.*

Exiles. Or, in the words of the New Testament: strangers. Our real home is the new earth. We do not have 'a lasting city' here. (Hebrews 13:14)

But God says, neither to the Israelites nor to us: 'Don't be concerned with this earth.' On the contrary. Jesus orders us to proclaim the good news throughout the world. His followers must proclaim it to the whole creation.

The New Testament pays a lot of attention to relationships, justice and the fight against poverty. Christians are called to be good employees and good neighbours.

Doers rather than doomsters¹.

We should not be doomsters. We mustn't think: 'This world will be lost anyway, this creation is going down the tubes, all help is just a drop in the ocean.'

We must be doers. We must consider carefully what it means to follow Jesus: who we are and what we can offer. And then we must take action: We must fold our hands and roll up our sleeves. For this world. For our environment. For our city.

2. Everyday life is special!

On behalf of God, Jeremiah says to the exiles: 'Build houses, plant gardens, get married and have children.' What do you notice about that command? It is a simple, down-to-earth, ordinary order. Just: do what humans like doing - live, eat, get married. That is remarkable!

God is shaping the future of his people. And what must that people do? They only have to live and to make sure that they have children. God uses everyday life for the future of his people.

A holy future, a divine future. And so everyday life becomes of divine significance. In this way, building houses, planting gardens and having children become holy acts. The French priest Pierre Teilhard De Chardin expressed this beautifully: '*Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things...as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value.*'

All these 'ordinary things of life, that actually turn out not to be so ordinary' connect you to the place where you live. You become rooted. You must connect with the earth, become attached to a spot: thank God if you have that opportunity or that experience!

Because millions of people can't do that anymore. They are on the run from violence or advancing deserts. Being able to put down roots is a gift. There is a great need for people who are dedicated to the place where God has situated them. Deeply rooted people hold together the fabric of a society.

Build houses, plant gardens, get married and have children, so that you'll thrive in that country and not waste away.

This command is also remarkable because it focuses on the long term. Inhabiting houses, growing your food, starting a family: these are things you do day after day. But God places these everyday activities in the perspective of 70 years: there must be a people to return to Jerusalem.

And thus he places them in the perspective of hundreds of years: the history of Israel as God intends it.

A long-term view, a long-term perspective like that, changes your life. It makes you realize that the choices you make today will have long-lasting consequences. Suppose you are twenty, and you choose to rarely visit church anymore. The children that you will have years later, will not learn this habit from you. And your grandchildren will have no idea who Jesus Christ is. Your faithfulness now will have consequences for the church of the future.

Often we forget that long-term view, especially where everyday life is concerned; eating, drinking, inhabiting, buying. We have lived God's creation to pieces, and even though we gradually begin to notice the consequences, we make very few changes in our behaviour.

We only think about the short term.

We squander the resources of this earth as fast as possible, because we make money out of them. And as much as possible we shift the costs of cleaning up the pollution to others.² Will there be enough left for the generations to come? Well, let tomorrow take care of itself.

We are like people building a treehouse out of the roots of the tree we live in.³ God is wiser. He knows how dependent we are on our environment. Seek the welfare of the place where you live, For if it thrives, you will thrive.

3. Pray for the city and seek its shalom

Shalom, that is: life as God intended it. 'Thriving' is a beautiful translation of shalom! Pray for the city and devote yourself to making it thrive. We must not be doomsters, but doers. Here you see the first glimpse of what will become very important in the time after Jesus' life.

The first task of the church is to talk about Jesus Christ.
He is our peace.

The second task of the church is to live with Jesus Christ.
He gives peace.

Living with Jesus Christ means: putting his love into action, living out his words. And so we should also devote ourselves to everything that advances peace, prosperity and justice. Even if that does not immediately lead to an increase in the number of Christians or to church growth.

What difference could a few thousand Jewish exiles make?

What can you contribute to making your city thrive?

But God's order is not concerned with the results. God's order is to pray.

When you pray, it does not matter how many of you there are. What matters is the power of the God you pray to!

I recently came across a few examples in the Netherlands that fit in with Jeremiah 29:7:

Stichting Present and A Rocha. Both are dedicated to everyday life.

Stichting Present is often called in to help clean up homes or gardens, completely in line with Jeremiah 29.

A Rocha is a movement of Christians that are devoted to conserving natural areas in their vicinity.

Seek the welfare of the city; for if it thrives, you will thrive.

Once you commit yourself to that effort, you receive so much in return. A friend told me about his dedication to an old country estate near his town. He said: *'The estate has changed, but the largest change may have taken place in the lives of those 150 people that have worked there over the past years. They have come to appreciate this small piece of the creation. They are no longer indifferent to the place God has given them to live. They feel rooted there. When they bike past the estate, they say: Look at that tree that I planted!'*⁴

Amen

¹ In Dutch: 'Geen doemdenkers, maar doendenkers.' Oneliner by Henk Oosterling, a philosopher at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam

² Hans van Kasteren, TU Eindhoven, ND 2-9-2013

³ Dave Bookless, ND 8-9-2013

⁴ Embert Messelink, founder of A Rocha Nederland