

“HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?”

Psalm 139: 1-12; Jeremiah 29: 4-14

Dr. David R. Elliott

At various times in our lives we are confronted by great challenges. A few of you went through the Great Depression. Some of you went through World War Two. Undoubtedly there are great challenges ahead of each of us; be they poor health, broken relationships, financial difficulty, death, or even war. We ask the question, “how then shall we live?” when our world is falling down around us.

If we look back over our families’ histories we see that when some of them were confronted by the Great Depression they hunkered down and tried to rise out the economic storm by cancelling their plans and their dreams. The economic depression became also a psychological or spiritual depression. Some people put off marriage until times got better or they put off having children until they had funds to properly feed and clothe them. My parents did. If you were faced with a great challenge of adverse circumstances, how would you react?

I want us to look at Scripture where God addresses the very question of “how then shall we live?” It is in the book of Jeremiah (29:4-14). Let me give you some background. For years the prophets of God had been warning the people of Israel and Judah that they needed to repent of their idolatry and their social behaviour. They had been worshipping false gods and not living right—they had been robbing the poor, the widows and the orphans by overcharging for goods and services, charging outrageous interest, or not paying adequate wages. If you took part in the program of reading through the Bible last year, you would have read their words in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Amos. Or you may have encountered them in the Bethel Bible Series.

God had said that he was going to bring judgement upon them if they did not change their ways. Because they did not heed those warnings God allowed the Babylonians to conquer Jerusalem in 605 B.C. Many of the Jewish people were taken as captives to Babylon where they lived as slave labourers. Some of them many not have been personally guilty of idolatry or mistreating their poor neighbours, but they were caught up in the events of the day. Or they may have been apathetic and had not tried to improve the situation in their society. It is a lesson which we in Canada need to contemplate. God may have to bring judgement upon our society in order for us to wake up to our responsibilities to God and our neighbours!

Living in Babylon those Jewish captives felt that God had abandoned them. Many of us have gone through a similar “dark night of the soul.” Medieval theologians had an expression, “Deus abscondus.” Roughly translated it means God has taken off. Many great saints at various times in their lives have experienced this sense of abandonment. Even Mother Teresa had bouts of doubt in her life. But she continued her work among the poor in India because she believed that God had called her to it.

In the Psalms we often find the psalmists expressing feelings of abandonment. Where are you God? Why are you not helping me? But most of the psalms conclude with remembrance of the steadfast love of God for his people. One of my favourites is Psalm 139

which we had read this morning. Wherever I am, whatever circumstances I am in, God is with me. Yet, so many times we forget this.

The Jews in Babylon felt forsaken by God. They sent a message back to Jeremiah asking “how then shall we live?” Jeremiah inquired of the Lord and received the answer which was read this morning. To summarize this passage, we see that God tells them to live life as they normally would. Build house, plant crops, get married, have babies. Be good citizens. Work for the welfare of the city and pray for its leaders.

God also condemned some so-called prophets who had been upsetting the people with their own message. Reading between the lines we wonder if they had been telling the people to hunker down. Had they been telling them to work against the welfare of the city? Had they been trying to overthrow the Babylonians by terrorist activities? Were they spreading a message of despair?

God’s message to the Jews was that He was in control! God would eventually bring them back to Jerusalem in 70 years. He was with them even in their adversity. In the meantime they were to actively pursue life and the welfare of people around them.

I want to tell you a modern story of how that biblical principle was put into practice. Those of you, who know me, know that I spend a fair bit of time in Ireland. When in Belfast we attend Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, which is a very friendly church. On our first day there we were invited out to dinner by one of the families. We could not oblige because we had other plans. On another occasion one of the greeters, when hearing that I was a historian, said that there was an American historian there that day, and that he would introduce us after the service. When we met, I learned that he too was a professor of church history and that we shared a number of friends on both sides of the border. He told me a remarkable story about Fitzroy Church and its former pastor Ken Newell. He had written a book about this pastor and when I got home I ordered it. It was a blessing to read it. (Ronald A. Wells, *Friendship Towards Peace: The Journey of Ken Newell and Gerry Reynolds*). Let me share some of its contents with you.

Ken Newell grew up in a staunch Orange Lodge atmosphere in Belfast which was a virtual apartheid. Protestants numbered only about 20% of the population, but owned 80% of the wealth and all of the political power. Catholics represented 80% of the population and had only 20% of the wealth, and no political power. The Orange Lodge parades to celebrate July 12th were used to intimidate Catholics. The political and economic injustice caused some Catholics to adopt terror tactics and Protestant para-military forces retaliated harshly.

Ken Newell grew up hating Catholics and on one occasion as a teenager he threw rocks at Catholics as they went into their church. Several years later Ken Newell found faith in Christ and slowly a transformation took place. He was still an Orangeman, and was a rigid fundamentalist at this point. While attending Queen’s University in Belfast his local Presbyterian Church suggested that he study for the ministry. He then attended Union Theological College where he remained suspicious of its more liberal way of thinking. But God was at work in his life.

In 1972 he went out as a Presbyterian missionary in Timor, Indonesia. While there, he realized what it was to be a Christian minority in an alien culture with no political power. He began to see that Christians needed to work together. Then the unexpected happened.

One day a stranger came to the door and said, 'my name is Noel Connor. I understand that you are from Ireland. So am I. I am a Catholic priest who works in the mission up in the mountains. I just wanted to speak with some of my own countrymen.' Ken Newell invited him in. This may have been the first time in his life that he had even had a conversation with a Catholic. They soon discovered that they shared more in common in their faiths than he had realized. A friendship developed between them and began meeting for prayer and Bible study.

In 1975 Newell and his family returned to Belfast on furlough and health issues in the family prevented them from returning to Timor. Soon he was appointed minister of Fitzroy Church. Northern Ireland was in the depths of the Troubles with daily assassinations and bombing. Northern Ireland was in civil war. The British Army patrolled the streets. Newell had to ask himself, "How then do we live." How do I bring the message of Christ to this situation?

He came to the realization that the Presbyterian Church had to disconnect itself from the Establishment and speak Christian truth to power. In 1978 he walked one hundred yards down the street to meet the local Catholic curate. They formed a friendship and brought their congregations together for World Day of Prayer meetings and Christmas carol nights. This lasted until the priest was transferred to another county. Ken continued to work for peace, but found resistance in his own church and denomination.

In 1981 Ken Newell did the "Thought for the Day on BBC Ulster." He talked about peace and told of attending a meeting where 700 Protestants and Catholics embraced each other in the love of Christ. Their mutual love of Jesus was the answer for Northern Ireland. After this was broadcast he received an invitation to Clonfort Monastery, located in the poorest ghetto of Belfast. He soon developed a deep friendship with the new abbot Gerry Reynolds who came from the Republic of Ireland. God had also been working in Reynold's life. They covenanted to work together for peace and the welfare of the city. They held joint services, had joint prayer meetings and Bible studies for their congregations.

When people were killed in terrorist attacks, by protestant or catholic para-military groups, or by British soldiers, Newell and Reynolds together visited the victims' families, prayed with them, and attended the funerals. Secretly they began meeting with the opposing political sides, and eventually brought them together for talks. Newell even had Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, speak from the pulpit of Fitzroy Church, sharing his aspirations for peace and social justice. Meanwhile Ian Paisley and his gang were outside, banging on the walls of the church.

During this time, both men often lived in fear as they met with the paramilitary groups. Yet, God was with them, and they were instrumental in creating the atmosphere which resulted in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, brokered by Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, that brought a high degree of peace to Northern Ireland. For their work Newell and Reynolds were awarded an international honour as peace makers in 1999, sort of a mini Nobel Peace Prize.

But story goes on. The demographics around Fitzroy Church had been changing. Many of the congregation had moved out to the suburbs and their homes were now occupied by foreigners, most of whom were Catholics. Fitzroy Church was empty most of the week. The suburbanites were no longer attending week day activities because of parking problems. Knowing that it would not have much success ministering to these new Catholic people, Fitzroy offered its building to the monks at Clonfort monastery to use as base and meeting place for its work among the local Catholic residents. The last time I attended there the local Catholic children were involved in a VBS program and they participated in the Sunday service at Fitzroy.

When Father Connor first visited Ken Newell in Timor he was building a bridge that would have far reaching consequences. When Ken Newall walked the 100 yards down the street in Belfast to meet with the local catholic priest, he was also building a bridge, even though he may have been frightened. When Clonfort Monastery reached out to Ken Newell after his radio broadcast, an even greater bridge was created. We must remember that from his journey down the street in 1978, until the Good Friday Peace Accord, it took 20 years.

There is a recent movie called *The 100 Foot Journey*, a modern parable that depicts a similar sentiment. A restaurant family in India were firebombed and they fled to France to set up a restaurant there, across from a Michelein-starred *haute cuisine* restaurant. The owner of the French restaurant did everything she could to drive those foreigners away. They had different music; they used too much curry, and other exotic spices. She laid complaints against them for violation of noise bylaws. She bought up all the local produce so that they could get none for their restaurant. Her hatred of them was palpable. Then one of her employees set fire to the Indian restaurant. When she learned that her hatred had incited that violence, she made the difficult 100-foot journey across the street to say that she was sorry and to make amends, even hiring the Indian chef to work in her facility after discovering how good a cook he was.

As we bring this sermon to a close, we have a lot to think and pray about in our lives. May God help us find your way during times of uncertainty as did those Jewish exiles in Babylon and the examples of Ken Newell and Father Reynolds in Belfast. God has not abandoned you, even though you may not feel it right now. Hear the word of the Lord: work for the welfare of the city. We have to ask questions of ourselves. Have we been apathetic about conditions in your society and letting evil triumph because of our inaction? Have we been loving our neighbour and our enemy? Or have we been inciting hatred by our attitudes? What bridges can we build? In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen