

Biblical Reflection on Jeremiah 29:4-7 - Janna Postma

Welfare to the City

Many people are uprooted nowadays. No doubt some of us are. The human brain is now the subject of intensive research. It has been shown that the functioning of parts of the strands of DNA may be deactivated, when a person is put into a strange environment. Sometimes these strands regenerate. Sometimes they don't. We have to be able to trust our environment, the people around us – and God.

In this text the prophet Jeremiah talks about this kind of trust. The people of Israel are living under Babylonian occupation. Many, including some of the ruling class, have already been deported to Babylon. It is the year 597 B.C. In Hebrew the term *Galut* is used to denote deportation, banishment. *Gola* denotes the people who are now far from their homeland and - or so they think - far from their God. Jeremiah disputes this thinking. The Babylonians were not as cruel as the Assyrians, who deported the inhabitants of the northern kingdom, Israel, more than a hundred years earlier. So far as we know, there is hardly a trace left of them. On the other hand, those who have been deported from Judea are allowed to live together in Babylonia. Part of the population, including the aristocracy, has been left in Judea. Nationalist prophets of salvation in Judea prophecy that Babylon will fall and the Kingdom of Judea will be restored. They are not alone in this: Neighbouring nations which have also been conquered want to start an uprising. Jeremiah opposes these false prophets. He is persecuted, but refuses to be quiet. He is right: In 586 B.C. Jerusalem will be laid waste and almost the entire population will be taken into captivity.

Now, in the year 597 B.C., a delegation is being sent to Babylon by King Zedekiah and is about to leave. They are to tell King Nebuchadnezzar that all is quiet in Judea. That is not really true, but there is fear of another ransacking. Jeremiah gives the delegation a letter to take. He knows how things are with his compatriots in Babylon: They are torn between hope and despair: Are the foreign Gods stronger? Is JHWH still able to help us, now that we are in their territory?

But the prophet speaks about the land "into which I (JHWH) have allowed you to be transported". HE is also there in foreign lands. There is no region where other Gods rule. But Babylon will hold sway for three generations. The banished people should therefore build houses, create gardens and enjoy the harvest. Above all they should allow their children to marry, so that the Judean population increases and does not decrease: "Seek the welfare, the peace of the city (or "the land", according to several sources), into which I have caused you to be banished. And pray for it to JHWH, because your own welfare depends on its welfare." He ends his plea by stating: "They are lies that the false prophets tell in my name: I have not sent them – This is the word of JHWH."

Jeremiah's pronouncement is revolutionary. He doesn't preach an uprising or armed resistance. He doesn't preach revolution or living a separate existence. But rather he preaches living a normal life, as far as possible, in the foreign land. It is possible to be God's people even under foreign rule. HE is there, in our midst, in the midst of all people.

Now I'm going to make a jump. Doesn't Jesus also say, in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth"? (Matthew 5:13)

It is precisely when those who worship God live as strangers amongst other people that they can show how it is possible to build community amongst themselves and to act justly in their dealings with those outside their own community.

What does this prophecy mean for us, especially for those of us who have always lived in the same place? I think it is very relevant to our time. In many European countries we believers are in a sense strangers. If we also seek to promote truth, reconciliation, peace, and disarmament, then we are definitely peculiar. The nationalist Gods rule – even over the poor and the foreigners, with whom we would rather not have to share anything. I don't wish to disparage democracy: it may well serve to correct and prevent injustice. It is the fruit of both Christian faith and humanism.

I believe that there is a God who cares for our world. And it is because of this that I can say with Jeremiah: Plant gardens and grow in numbers in the land in which you live. Work for shalom, for the public good. Because your own welfare depends on it!

We ourselves and every new generation can put this into practice and bring closer a world in which we are all at home. Believers who oppose violence, injustice and armaments are needed more than ever. They gain their strength from everyday life in community.

It is because we are strangers that we are able to witness to peace. This is not easy. But HE is there, He is with us and with all people.