

Our gospel, our reading from Jeremiah, and our psalm speak to us about the challenges of exile and return for an individual as well as for a people. Obviously exile is a challenge because it takes us away from what we have known and perhaps loved, but return also has its challenges because we never return to the same place. Even when we do return we do we find that there are changes in ourselves or in what we have been exiled from that precipitate still more changes.

I love the passage from our gospel because it speaks of God's grace and also of the freedom we have to ask God for what is in our hearts. Bartimaeus is a blind beggar. In today's world blindness is challenging but it is still possible to live a fulfilled life. In 1st century Palestine, Bartimaeus has been reduced to begging, he is an outcast, with no way to earn a living, and, considered by some sets of Judaism to be defective, so doubly outcast. Bartimaeus has to fight the crowd for Jesus' attention and when Jesus hears him he asks Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus says humbly, "My teacher, let me see again." By these words we know that Bartimaeus has not always been blind but he has been living in exile from the world of those with sight. Jesus proclaims that Bartimaeus' faith has made him well. Once made well, Bartimaeus does not go back to his old life instead he chooses to follow Jesus on the way. What Bartimaeus does not know is that Jesus' way will lead to crucifixion and death. We do not know what happened to Bartimaeus – did he remain faithful or did he run away never to believe again? Regardless his life was changed forever.

For those of you who have experienced a debilitating illness or accident, you know that your life has changed too. You may be grateful to be alive but perhaps your functionality is limited, you might have to take medication for the rest of your life, or perhaps your perspective on what it means to be dependent has changed... Not infrequently relationships with spouses, partners, or children change in the face of a debilitating illness. Some cope well, others not so well. If ill-health can be considered an exile, then we are not the same as we were when we are permitted to return home. Like I said last week people are not always transformed by suffering sometimes they are stunted or even destroyed by it but sometimes by God's grace it provides an opportunity to grow.

Our psalm describes the classic understanding of exile – the people of Israel had been taken captive and sent to Babylon. They had to leave their lifestyle, their belongings, their worship, and their land behind. Time passed and they were permitted to return. There was much rejoicing when this happened and then the reality set in. They returned to a land that had been left to those not important enough to be hauled off to Babylon. Foreigners had moved in. Much was in ruins, the temple, the walls that protected the city, the fields, and the vineyards. They had to rebuild. It was not easy work because they also had to learn to be a people together again. This psalm expresses the joy at the notion of return as well as the recognition in the middle of setbacks that God's ongoing assistance was going to be required to rebuild.

Perhaps you remember Thomas Wolfe's classic Southern novel "You Can't Go Home Again" about a writer's difficult experience when he returns home after having written a novel about his hometown. Needless to say the natives were not too happy with him and he comes to acknowledge that no, you can't go home again. Nevertheless there is a chance to build something anew. Perhaps you too have had the experience of trying to go home again. It could

be to a place: your home town, or the place your family vacationed as a child, for some of us is revisiting our college campus, or even a first house or apartment. You can't go back to be the person you were then but sometimes it's like touching base so that you are safe to move out or on again.

Perhaps you have experienced exile from a memory of a good time, of a good relationship that has been too painful to recall because it is gone. Time can be God's anesthetic, it can do wonders with memories, creating hazy boundaries that eventually enable us to go back and revisit what had once been too painful to recall. When we are able to recall a good memory that had been closed to us we experience a small healing that can help us to move forward, like those who sowed with tears and are now able to reap with songs of joy.

Exile also occurs when you have to leave an organization or a relationship. Have you ever left a job because it was no longer the place it had been when you first felt comfortable there? I did that one with a company I had been with for 18 years. It was very weird. I was going to a better job, in the sense of a more important role, and a larger salary. Unfortunately it didn't last very long. I ended up returning to my old job, and while it felt good to be welcomed back, the organization had moved on and so had I. I returned with new skills and was able to put them to use and able to leave again in a few years without the same sense of loss.

Exile is also imposed on us. If you've ever been downsized, re-orged, or fired from an organization, you know the sense of loss and how awkward it can be to connect with your former co-workers.

Finally there is exile from relationships. When it is self-imposed – we leave someone or sever a relationship because it is no longer healthy for us. When we can, we forgive for our own sake, so that we can move on but the exile is still there. When there is contrition, forgiveness makes reconciliation possible and we can begin again, a new relationship is negotiated and the exile is over.

As adults many of us have experienced self-imposed exile from God. This is where God's faithfulness and mercy become so important. For those of us who have returned to God in our adult lives you know exactly what I mean. How many of us have drifted away from God at one time or another, sometimes casually but most often because of some hurt that hadn't been or wasn't being addressed or because we were doing things that we shouldn't and were feeling shameful or rebellious. The Israelites were constantly abandoning God's ways and running into trouble because of it. God being merciful and endlessly patient would rescue them. Then God would renew their covenant and the next thing you know they would be sinning again, violating all of God's laws, and behaving as if they didn't owe their identity and existence to God's love. In our reading from Jeremiah God is promising to rescue the Israelites from their exile, all they have to do is ask. God promises to bring them back, to gather those who have been dispersed, those who are blind and lame and pregnant. Weeping will be followed by consolation. So too with us. God is always available to us. Exile is not God's choice it is ours. We just have to be ready to acknowledge our need. Sometimes that relationship is renewed like turning on a light switch, other times it is more gradual like the dawn. And like the dawn we know that it is a sign that the sun will rise and set; God's light will be there for us, ready to welcome us back from our self-imposed exile. And once we have returned life is not the same. Being open to God will

change our lives, so that, like Bartimaeus, we can toss aside our cloaks, the burdens and ties that bind us liberating us to follow Jesus, wherever he might lead.

Amen.