



**The Parish Churches Of
St Robert of Knaresborough, Pannal &
St Michael and All Angels, Beckwithshaw**



Dear Friends in Christ

I wonder what you felt when we were told that there should be no public worship in our places of worship? Harrogate was getting quieter every day, physical greetings were unwelcome, shop shelves were being stripped of items thought to be essential and we were entering a strange new world. This was a world of self-isolation chosen or imposed, a world where we were being separated from loved ones in order to protect them, a world where our physical gathering to worship, pray and share bread and wine was forbidden.

This felt like exile from the world I knew and I began to think about the exile of the people of Israel. I want to share some thoughts about the experience of exileⁱ and some of my thoughts of where this leads us.

When the Israelites were exiled to Babylon they were taken from the land, which they believed was their inheritance and in which they had built the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was not the only place of worship, people met together to pray, to read scripture and to receive teaching. Families prayed in their homes. The temple was not the only place of worship but it was the only place where sacrifice could be offered to God. The temple was the place where the faithful felt that they came into God's presence in a distinctive way and the continuity of the offering of sacrifice in the temple was at the heart of their identity as God's people in God's land, people of the covenant.

In Babylon there was and could be no Jewish temple, in Babylon they could not offer sacrifices to God. Even worse, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and desecrated and the offering of sacrifice could not continue there either. The heart had been torn out of their religious practice.

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth,
saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of
Zion!'
How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?*

Psalm 137:1-4



How did the exiled people of Israel respond to their new situation?

There are, of course, a variety of interpretations of the biblical evidence for the way in which the exiles lived and worshipped in Babylon but what seems clear is that they identified the practices that were distinctive of their religious identity, those they could continue to observe and develop in their new context. By identifying the practices that could continue they were able to recognise the presence of God with them, even in a foreign land. In fact, they began to develop an understanding of God as present everywhere in the world and perhaps God could be known by everyone.

In exile the people of Israel were able to continue to worship, to grow in their knowledge of God, to be challenged by new possibilities.

Of course, exile was not easy and there continued to be a longing for their own land and a hope for return. It took a little longer for the people to realise that after return from exile things would not simply be the same as before, but that is another part of their story and ours.

We may feel that we are in exile, certainties have been stripped away, we are facing an unknown future. For some of us, the fact that we cannot share together in services of Holy Communion is a cause of sorrow and a great loss. Holy Communion is a central and distinctive part of our worshipping community and it is not possible for this to continue at this time. We are forced to accept this, perhaps to grieve and certainly to look forward to the time when we will come together around the Lord's Table again.

The call to care for others, to be aware of the needs of our neighbours and to offer hope in the desert place of fear and despair is a distinctive of our faith and we are finding many ways to share God's love with those around us.

As we move through the different phases of this pandemic, I think we need to realise that it won't every be the same again and that moving out from where we are now into the next phase is only the beginning, not the end. We will go forward, but we may go back, how we respond defines us as what sort of community of faith we are.

As a PCC in both churches we have started to look at what the future holds in terms of what church looks like. As you can imagine this is not easy for some and it will be painful as they lament the loss of something they feel is precious. For others what we bring afresh will bring joy. For all of us it brings uncertainty.

We were told that from Monday 15th June 2020 we can allow private prayers by members of the laity in our churches. We had no notice of this announcement and I know people are anxious to be in our holy spaces for their own devotions and prayers, but I want to ask you to be patient.

Starting to come out of exile isn't easy. It isn't easy practically, as we start to preparing the building for the now and think about where we are likely to be in a few weeks' time and then in a couple of month's time, and so on. Social

distancing is here for the foreseeable future we need to accept this to be able to live in a different place – live in a new land.

The PCC and especially the wardens are working through this diligently along with the clergy, there is much to do before we are ready and safe for people to occupy the building. We have started this process, but it will take us a few weeks to implement this and then to begin to pre-empt the next stage. Please be patient and please be kind as we work through this.

As ever we continue to pray for you and pray for the world through this uncertain time. We are a people in exile and a people of hope, we are a people for such a time as this. Go well and stay safe.

With every blessing

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'John' in a cursive script. The signature on the right is 'Abbie' in a similar cursive script.

The Reverends John Smith & Abbie Palmer

¹ Thanks to Revd Ruth Gee Assistant Secretary of the Methodist Conference for her thoughts on exile.