

Pentecost 23, October 13, 2013. "The Ten Lepers". Nigel Taber-Hamilton

What does it mean to be an exile? What does it mean to live in exile? Those are two different things. And to each, there are many answers but one common theme. The origin of the word "exile" comes from two words, one Latin the other Greek which, put together, mean "to wander away from one's soil", which suggests to me that originally "exile" was a self-imposed choice. As the word developed, it took on a second meaning: an exile imposed by others.

To live in exile means, it seems to me, to live away from your home for a prolonged period of time. It can be imposed or chosen. When I first came to this country in 1977 I was choosing a form of self-imposed exile, something that was short-term, bracketed, and positive, intended to last a year.

For Russian dissidents during the Soviet era, like the famous author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, exile was imposed by his own government.

There are other sorts of exile, too. The examples I just gave were both to do with physical exile, but it's not only entirely possible but also quite common to live in emotional exile from one's family and friends, present in body but not in spirit (and I choose that word – "spirit" – intentionally). In my family I had two cousins who, as a child, I saw quite frequently, but who I never really knew, because they were absent to me in all but body – as they were absent to everyone around them, living in a guarded, special world known only to them. They both died before their time, unknown, really, to our extended family. I'll bet you have family members like that, who've chosen a self-imposed exile, or know of other families who have someone disconnected from family life. More than once I've counseled someone who chose a path of self-imposed exile only to regret it deeply in later life.

One of my high school friends had an older brother whose behavior was so unpredictable and violent that his parents, once he reached 18, essentially exiled him from the family home.

Fr. Alexander Tkachenko – our parish's good friend and a Russian orthodox priest who's the director of the St. Petersburg Children's Hospice – talks often about the stigma of cancer and other terminal diseases among otherwise well-intentioned people, especially when the victims are children, and how a frequent consequence for the children – and their families – is exile from the communal areas of the large apartment blocks so common in Russia.

So when we get to today's Hebrew Scripture, or Luke's gospel, the language of exile should resonate with us.

Jeremiah's advice to the victims of exile is striking: when you find yourself in a place of exile embrace the reality and find a way to live through it to get beyond it. My mother never got over her divorce from my father – even when, after 20 years, she realized she'd wasted a good chunk of her life – had exiled herself from the richness that was possible for her despite the divorce. Instead she chose to be angry and bitter that she'd wasted 20 years of her life being angry and bitter. "So you find yourselves in Babylon", Jeremiah said. "You've got to learn to live with that

reality, to live with the loss and incorporate it into your lives. Only then can you be open to the possibility of restoration.

He was also clearly saying, “build a life for yourself where you find yourself, don’t wait for someone else to change your circumstances.”

Those exiled Israelites took his advice – and when the possibility of restoration, of returning home from exile – arose from the largesse of King Cyrus of Persia – not all of them accepted the invitation – they had found that their home was in a different place, that they were no longer exiled but were now at home in Babylon. My own personal experience is that sometimes in the exile you find that your home was never really your home, that you haven’t really found a new home, but have found “home” for the first time.

Luke’s story is also about exile – in this case an exile imposed because the ten individuals who had what we now know to be psoriasis – a noncontagious skin condition – didn’t fit the definition of “normal”. Notice these ten came to Jesus recognizing him as a healer from God – because quite naturally they believed that God had the power to heal, and only God’s disciples could be vehicles of that healing. So these were still individuals who had faith in God, even if their faith in humanity had been sorely tested.

But Luke’s story isn’t really about physical healing – though that *is* a part of the picture here. The healing for Luke is about wholeness, not simply physical health. All ten lepers were healed physically, but the literal translation of that last sentence, directed only at the one doubly-exiled leper (a Samaritan Jew, not a Judean Jew who was also a leper) is “your faith has saved you”: only one leper, this one, was “made whole”, was saved in all the possible ways we can be saved.

What were the characteristics of that one, now whole, human being? He Praised God, and he gave thanks. An awareness and an acceptance that the world is bigger than our local neighborhood, and that this entire world, our lives, this universe, everything, is God’s creation and that it is all profoundly and uniquely good because God is good, all the time, even now can only lead to a posture of praise and thankfulness.

The Samaritan leper got it. He stands for us as a symbol: he is, in biblical terms, the metaphor for what it means to be exiled and to come home. And isn’t that, in the end, what we all long for? To come home; home from all the different forms of exile we experience in our lives; home to a place where we’re accepted for who we are, not who others think we should be; home to the warmth and security of a loving embrace; home.

May that gift be ours.