From Canada

THE EXILIC MISSION: BRAVE DEFIANCE, RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT AND ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES

by Jean Stairs

Introduction

Every night when I was a child, my father and I had a ritual we went through before I went to sleep. Silly as it sounds, I found it to be very reassuring. Before he turned out the light, he would go over to the closet door, open it up, peek inside, and say, 'Anybody in there?' He was asking any monsters that might have stopped by to acknowledge their presence. Hearing no replies, he would close the closet door and wish me a good night. What can I say? It worked. What worked about this ritual, as I analyze it as an adult, was the fact that my father didn't ridicule my fears. He didn't say, 'Snap out of it. You know there are no monsters in your closet.' Instead he acknowledged, by his actions, that he knew my fears were very real, and he loved me through them. Many years later, I found a poster – which hung for quite some time in my office – that has pink, goofy monsters on it. The caption underneath reads: 'From ghoulies and ghosties and things that go bump in the night, God, deliver us.' God, deliver us from our fear. One of my favourite quotes from A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, [1] describes how I often feel. 'Piglet,' said Rabbit, taking out a pencil and licking the end of it, 'you haven't any pluck.' 'It is hard to be brave,' said Piglet, sniffing slightly, 'when you're only a very small animal.'

It is hard to be brave in a world where violence promises to be with us for the foreseeable future and seems to be woven into the fabric of our social and symbolic structures. Violence on a massive international scale seems to characterize the fault lines between traditional spheres of world religions, in the Middle East, in the Indian subcontinent, in the former Yugoslavia. It also is a feature within those spheres, sometimes along other religiously defined lines such as that which separates Catholic and Protestant in Ireland,

or between gays and straights, or between the secular and the pious in various parts of the world, including our own country. Violence is also endemic in situations not directly defined by religious convictions, on city streets and in marital bedrooms. It is hardly news that the world is a violent place and since the terrorist attacks on US soil and other places, we have been acutely aware of the intersection of religion and violence.

It is also hard to be brave when change is rapid, Monday's election may determine our future, religious scandals abound, job security is a thing of the past, sex offender registries are implemented, and everything is post-modern, post-Christian, post-capitalist. We are experiencing the loss of a structured, reliable, controllable world, one that gave us meaning and coherence. This sense of displacement results in a distressing anxiety and restlessness. Who are we? What are we to do? Who will go with us? Where are we going? Life's most basic spiritual and religious questions confront us when we are unwillingly deported into unfamiliar and unstable territory. It is hard to be brave when you haven't any pluck!

This morning I want to explore this unfamiliar territory more fully, particularly in reference to our mission in this context. Then we will take a closer look at the meaning of mission in an exilic context, as suggested by the biblical framework of Psalm 137. Finally, I will draw out three defining characteristics of exilic mission that can be observed in the Psalmist's reaction to his exilic context. These characteristics are the sub-title of my address:

1) brave defiance;
2) respectful engagement;
3) alternative practices.

What is our current context for mission?

The current context for mission today, the missionary activity of our various faith traditions takes place in the framework of these times of fear and dislocation. Poverty, war, unemployment, the exploitation of the environment, the expulsion of people from the economic system, domestic and international violence, and racial hatred and discrimination are common to all contexts. We are living at a moment when almost every aspect of reality is rife with conflict, and when each expresses a distinct form of individual or collective violence. How do we talk about the love of God to ourselves, let alone to those who live in a world that is hostile to them, to those who suffer as a consequence of violence, to those condemned to

isolation or marginalization, to those who are alone in the midst of indifference? How do we interpret God's sovereignty in the midst of deterioration of life not only at the macro-structural level of the global economy but also, and perhaps as a consequence, at the personal and microsocial levels, where the crisis is not just in material terms, but also a crisis of meaning? How do we keep or find our 'pluck'?

To talk about 'mission' in this context is problematical.

'Mission' is no longer a popular word. To speak of mission carries with it the associations of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and hegemony.We are well aware of the imperialist legacy of the modern missionary movement. That history is a part of us and it is tempting at times to develop 'missionary amnesia.' Another option, of course (played out by some) is to develop 'missionary assertiveness.' There is no question that the U.S. led war on terrorism following the barbaric acts of September 11 has created a new context for Christian assertiveness and inter-religious conflict in some quarters. The understanding of mission in relationship to Western power for many missionaries has not changed much since the 19th century, although their means and methods have been greatly enhanced. This represents a renewal of a power-centered approach to mission, religiously inspired neo-colonialism in a new form, one that can aid and abet American political interests abroad.

Witness to the Love of God

Missionary amnesia and missionary assertiveness, however, are not the only two options. Witness to the love of God is still central to the understanding of what it means to be faithful in mission, and the promise of God who sends us out in mission is always hopeful. Because the word 'mission' has become problematic to many people today, there is the temptation to dispense with it all together, but this would not do because it would be a denial of who we are as a faithful people of God who so loves the world. Our task is to develop a new post-colonial approach to mission, a perspective that abolishes and transcends the past even as it continues and preserves the missionary calling of the people of God.

Singing a New Song

So, how will we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Psalm 137 provides some clues for this important task of re-visioning mission in our context and time. The experience of and reflection upon exile as contained in the Hebrew Scriptures is a helpful metaphor (no matter what our religious tradition) for understanding our current situation as people of God working

in chaplaincy and corrections. Any metaphor, of course, rarely achieves a precise match to our reality, but a metaphor can be useful to describe our reality. The purpose of a metaphor is to shed light upon our reality and evoke dimensions of it which otherwise would go unnoticed and therefore un-experienced. The metaphor of 'exile' is helpful to those among us who sense that there is a growing uneasiness about the sustenance of old patterns of faith, work and life. That uneasiness may be signalled by anxiety about how one serves with integrity in a correctional service context that is faced with decreasing financial resources, pressure to ensure quality assurance, and challenges to justify new programs and creative initiatives. The metaphor of exile relates to periods of displacement. Psalm 137 provides a biblical framework for understanding the nature of our displacement – our exile.

The Biblical Context of Exile

The exiled Jews of the Hebrew Scripture were of course geographically displaced. The Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar had taken them into exile following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. From this time until the edict of Cyrus in 583 B.C., the city and its temple lay in ruins, and its glory was preserved only in the memory of those who had stood within the gates. The armies of Babylon had marched into the Holy City, Jerusalem, like a steamroller, destroying everything in their pathway. They dismantled the Temple, the center of Jewish life, and left the city in shambles. The key leaders of the nation were packed into carts like animals and hauled off to Babylon as exiles in a foreign land.

What made this travesty even worse was that as the city of Jerusalem was being demolished and the nation of Israel was being humiliated, instead of coming to their aid, Israel's neighbours to the south, Edom, were cheering on the perpetrators of this evil. 'On the day Jerusalem fell,' the Psalmist wrote in verse 7, 'Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!' (Psalm 137:7).' As the reports were coming in to Edom about what was happening in Jerusalem, the Edomites were laughing and giving each other high fives and delightfully pronouncing to each other, 'They had it coming. I hope the Babylonians will tear down every building and flatten the entire city.'

The opening verses of Psalm 137 express the sorrow and heartache felt by the exiles that sat by the irrigation canals in Babylon and remembered Zion, the mount on which the temple was constructed. The time and the memories were so painful they could no longer sing or celebrate, but hung

their harps on the trees. The captors only increased their grief by taunting the exiles and demanding that they sing one of the songs of Zion. These songs of Zion had proclaimed the goodness of Jerusalem and declared that Zion would always be protected and defended by God. Now, in exile, the people were forced to recognize that Jerusalem had neither been inviolable nor so sacred that it could not be captured. With the faith expressed in such songs threatened by the realities of assault by Babylonian troops and overwhelmed by war machines and battering rams, it was no time for song, and especially not in a foreign land.

Like the ancient Judeans of old, many, or perhaps all of us, live at times in states of geographic exile. There is the exile of the divorced that live away from familiar surroundings and separated from family or the agony of a grandparent whose children and grandchildren live halfway around the globe. To the unemployed, there is the exile of being without a job; a facing life without the necessary security. To the young adult, there is the exile of leaving home. To the victims, whose safety has been ripped from them, there is the exile of living in a constant state of fear. To the prisoner, there is the exile of being snatched from familiarity and freedom. To the refugee, there is the exile of living in a strange land with unfamiliar customs and practices. Cuban Lourdes Casal writes that 'Exile is living where no house holds the memories of childhood.' [2] Sometimes we are in another land, weeping by our own rivers.

To be snatched from home and held captive in a foreign place is surely exilic. But the biblical metaphor of exile is not primarily geographical. Exile is also *social, moral and cultural.* It is a context and time where one's most treasured and trusted symbols of meaning, order making and faith are mocked, trivialized, dismissed or altered. Exile comes as our values and modes of authority are being effectively and progressively diminished. The 'homeland' in which we have grown up now feels much less than 'home.' Our homeland may have been dominated by male, white, western, Christian assumptions for a long time; so now, for Christians, there is the exile of living one's identity in a way that bears respectful witness in a pluralist society. Our homeland may have been dominated by a retributive, punitive model for dealing with violence; it may have been dominated by a capitalist and consumerist model, it may have been dominated by exclusionary and discriminatory methods for dealing with otherness reflected in racial diversity, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious

affiliation. I suspect that most of us in Canada grew up with these assumptions being both imposed and willingly embraced. Exile comes as we increasingly wake up to the reality that such a 'home' is gone and we have entered a place that we sense as both deeply alien and frightening; perhaps even dangerous.

How did the Psalmist react to the realities of geographical, social, cultural and moral exile? At least three responses can be discerned, which I offer to you today as clues for the task and privilege of mission in exilic contexts:

1) Firstly, exilic mission is characterized by bold defiance;
2) secondly, by respectful engagement with 'otherness' that surrounds us; and
3) thirdly, by alternative practices that allow the vision to be glimpsed and experienced, if only in part.

The Exilic Mission: Bold Defiance

In a context in which displacement, failed hopes, anger, wistful sadness and helplessness permeate our sense of self, sense of community and sense of future, the most remarkable observation we can make is this: Exile did not lead Jews in the Hebrew Scriptures to abandon their faith or to settle for abdicating despair, or to retreat to privatistic religion. On the contrary, exile evoked the most daring theological articulation in the Hebrew Scriptures. As Walter Bruggemann puts it, 'there is indeed something characteristically and deeply Jewish about such a buoyant response to trouble.'[3] This practice of buoyance through sadness resists falling into the grip of defeatism, retreat, or resignation to our evident cultural collapse, uncertainty and change.

Psalm 137 as a whole becomes an invitation to a kind of prayer that is passionate in its utter honesty and its bold defiance of injustice. Psalm 137 is a challenge to our contemporary circumstance of ministry that can be described by despair as the defining pathology that robs the church of missional energy and of stewardship generosity. The Psalmist dares to voice an option against all the visible evidence, for faith is precisely and characteristically 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1). As long as the exiles hope for nothing and are convinced of nothing unseen, it is guaranteed they will stay in thrall to Babylon. The psalmist refuses such a pitiful, shameful abandonment of their God-given identity.

When marginalization occurs and exclusionary behaviours abound, during times of exile the response to such injustice is not despair but the opposite: It is to give defiant voice to the experience of injustice. 'When the world should not be the way it is,' to quote liberation theologian Luis Segundo, then sorrow and sadness must be given defiant words so that our tears will not overtake us and define us. Although there may be some value in stoic acceptance of sorrow – a certain nobility in the acceptance of misery – modern psychology and ageless common sense stress the need to let go with our feelings and to verbalize our pain and grief in bold defiance of the situation. Grief and sorrow that are unspoken may break the heart that seals them in and hugs them tight. The time to sit by the waters of Babylon and weep comes to everyone, but defiant prayers, when the tears flow, can be the start of the revolution that renews our hope and preserves our faith.

To remember what we have left behind is to *'re-member'* it – to reconstitute things. Memory is the first step toward reconfiguring life. You will recall that even in the midst of a history that seemed to defy every confidence in remaining loyal to the memory of Jerusalem, the psalmist is unwilling to surrender his memory. First he said, 'May the Lord tear me limb from limb and render me unable to speak, if I ever forget what happened on this day (Psalm 137:5-6).' He prayed that God would indelibly emblazon the memory of this experience on his brain and in his heart. The act of remembering puts possibilities within reach in the soul. If Jerusalem is forgotten, joyful praise will never again be possible, for there will be no hands for playing the harp and no voices for singing the Lord's song. It is remembering Jerusalem – in a context where captors want you to you to forget – that offers hope, and indeed life.

The Psalmist is urging the people of God to think big and sing big about the forces of life still at work on its behalf. The purpose of remembering is to give Israel spine, to enable God's people not to give up on their covenantal identity for the sake of exilic masters. Thus, we are invited to find a little 'chutzpah' in holding to our particular God-given identity. It is not just any old song we sing to remember.We sing songs that help us remember that whether we live or die we belong to God and we are *God's people among all God's peoples.* The antidote to despair and the roots of hope lie in having a vision compelling enough to carry us through. Amidst the grief and devastation of exile, to find some buoyancy through sadness – to find some 'pluck' — is the first clue to mission in a time of exile.

The Exilic Mission: Respectful Engagement with Difference

This brings us to the second clue for exilic mission. God's people are not to withdraw from the empire's affairs, even if the empire seems strange indeed. Instead, we are to engage with respect the differences we encounter, remembering that we are God's people among all God's peoples. The danger in exile is to become so preoccupied with self that one cannot get outside one's self to re-think, re-imagine, and re-describe larger reality. Self-preoccupation seldom yields energy, courage or freedom. As one theologian put it, 'in ancient Israel, one of the strategies for coping shrewdly and responsibly beyond self were the narratives of defiance and cunning that enjoined exiles not to confront their harsh overlords directly, but to negotiate knowingly between faith and the pressures of reality.' [4]

In some ways, this harkens back to the old 'Christ against culture' model familiar to those among us from the Christian tradition. But the Psalmist's approach to exilic mission is not to fall into retreat from the new culture, nor is it to lean toward total accommodation. Rather, the requirement is an endlessly cunning, risky process of negotiation with how we will engage the 'otherness' or 'differences' that now surround us. If assimilation into the new terrain is a major threat for chaplains or prisoners, the challenge posed by the Psalmist is 'do not forget who you are, with whom you belong, nor the God whom you serve.' The mission is to live a life of endless negotiation, engaging the differences that are encountered or that will occur. Perhaps an apt metaphor is that of aiming to be 'bilingual' – knowing the speech of the strange new land and being willing to use it, but never forgetting the cadences of your mother tongue and homeland.

What is important here is to lean toward that which has the power to transform us in refreshing ways while at the same time retaining a deep definitional freedom from the pathologies, coercions and seductions that govern who we are supposed to be in our roles and responsibilities, whether our exile is as a prisoner or a chaplain. To put it bluntly, if we sense ourselves about to be domesticated, the exilic mission is to remember that there is more to life than conformist obedience or shameful accommodation. The people of God do indeed find themselves each day in the presence of those who preside over the exile – the Babylonians. They are unavoidable. But what is called for is not a ghetto existence. It is rather intended for full participation in the life of the dominant culture, albeit with a sense of subversiveness that gives unnerving freedom.

The ancient prophet Jeremiah knew about the dangers of withdrawal more than anyone, so in his letter to the exiles, he encouraged them with these amazing and challenging words: 'But seek the welfare (shalom) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare (shalom), you will find your welfare (shalom) (Jer. 29:7).' There is no separate peace for exiles, no private deals with God, no permitted withdrawal from the affairs of the empire. Rather, the exiled ones can actually impact Babylon with shalom through active concern and prayer.

In our pluralist context, for example, to engage difference takes on significant meaning. To be the people of God among all God's peoples provides a paradigm for living alongside people of other faiths, a receptive plurality of religions and a diversity that is intended by God. The disestablishment of Christianity as the dominant faith tradition provides a creative opportunity for renewal. To seek the welfare of the city to which we are sent suggests an approach which begins with listening to and for God, with opening ourselves up to an understanding of the mission of God in which we are receivers before we are givers or doers. Mission becomes a receptive mode, which may at times mean decreasing self-assertion for the sake of God's vision for the world. Mission becomes less about outcomes and more about relationality. To be relational, we have to position ourselves in more of a listening and receptive mode.

Margaret Wheatley writes: 'It takes courage to start a conversation. But if we don't start talking to one another, nothing will change. Conversation is the way we discover how to transform our world, together.'[5] What would allow us to have conversations of depth and trust across differences? And, perhaps more importantly, what are the courageous conversations we are not having? Thus, mission becomes a redefining of relationship and partnership, a negotiation based on our willingness to be surprised and to be learners. It means suspending what we might otherwise have disdained about the life of the other. An ethic of common welfare is marked by suspension of assumptions, genuine listening, and respectful questioning with the motivation of developing increased understanding.

This ethnic of common welfare introduces values to which any exilic mission must be subject – respect for human beings and their life in all its dimensions, and mutual acknowledgment among human beings that we live in a common and connected environment. We cannot be human until we are all human. Nobody can live unless everybody lives. There is no peace for any of us until there is real peace for all of us.

Who is the 'other?' The other appears before us in many guises – people of different ethic backgrounds, followers of different faiths, male and female, younger and older, supervisors and bosses, or the suffering ones in our sights. When we are living in a time of dislocation and anxiety, there is a temptation to gouge the neighbour, especially the economically vulnerable one. But the Psalm suggests that dislocation is a time to regroup and reorder relationships for the sake of the vulnerable ones in society. It appears that those we regard as 'other' are not 'other' for God. We are God's people among God's peoples. God who is revealed to the world in a diverse human society comes to us in the form of the other, challenges us to be more tolerant, calls for cohabitation and invites us to conciliatory relationships.

The Exilic Mission: Alternative Practice

This brings us to the third characteristic of exilic mission. The first is to refuse to give in to despair and to pray bravely and remember defiantly, the second is to engage with respect the differences that surround us when we are in exile, and the third is to develop alternative practices for living in exilic times and for exilic mission.

Human beings have an extraordinary ability and, seemingly, even a desire to break down the world into 'them' and 'us.' We do not know who 'we' are, it seems, until we know who 'they' are. And once we have identified 'them,' it is open to us to disclaim responsibility for their welfare, their rights or in extreme cases, their very existence. Humans tend to practice separation, exclusion, intolerance and destruction of our enemies.

Ironically, the Psalmist acknowledges this human tendency but then suggests an alternative practice. You will recall the raw outburst of the Psalmist. It is true that accepting and encouraging outrage when we are in exile is more difficult for us but a psychological and spiritual necessity. But, the Psalmist's outburst is understandable to any citizen who has experienced the invasion of their country, the rape of their women and children, or the capture of their young men. In situations of extreme grief, displacement and trauma, anger is both inevitable and inseparable from our exilic mission. It was feminist Christian ethicist Beverly Harrison who first coined the phrase 'the power of anger in the work of love.' She writes, 'we must never lose touch with the fact that all serious human moral activity, especially for social change, takes its bearings from the rising

power of human anger. … Anger denied subverts community. Anger expressed directly is the mode of taking the other seriously, of caring.' [6] The worst possible response to victimization would be to feel nothing. If there is to be hope and life beyond devastation, death, and despair, then anger can be the signal that change is called for, that transformation in relation is required. In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom,* the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. describes a religious experience he had, involving the various threats that had been made on his life and family. He wrote:

> *It seems as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.'* [7]

In this sense, Psalm 137 becomes an invitation to a kind of prayer that in its utter honesty trusts that God will love us as we are. 'I'm mad, God, and I'm not going to take it anymore.' 'I want to see my enemy crushed.' Our anger represents a drive toward incarnation: that is, God chooses to reveal God's self through people of authentic and deep passion, including in our desire for revenge.

It ought not to surprise us that the Psalmist prayed for the destruction of those who had perpetrated such a horrible travesty on Israel. Verse 9 is the infamous troubling and terrible text that declares a blessing on the one who would spread the brains of Babylonian babies on the rocks: 'a blessing on him who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks!' In spite of the pathos, or maybe because of the pathos of such psalms as this one, we can be thankful that the ancient Hebrews faced life and its calamities with an unfettered honesty that could give vent to the depths of affliction and torment.

What is important to note is that there is no evidence that the Psalmist acted out his expressed desire for revenge. The natural, human reaction to the horrible travesties human beings perpetrate on other human beings – feeling violated, betrayed and disappointed – generates a desire to seek revenge on those who try to destroy us. Clearly this is how many US citizens felt when terrorists brought down the World Trade Center and tried to destroy the Pentagon.

Psalm 137 is before us because there are days like 9/11. There are rapes. There are sexual predators in our midst. There are cop-killers. There are budget-slashers. There are colleagues who ambush us in the boardroom.

There are fundamentalist extremists and warriors in all religious traditions. But Psalm 137 is also before us because it presents an alternative practice. Notice that the expressed desire for revenge is offered to God and apparently left with God. The psalmist's brutally honest prayer breaks the cycle of actual violence. Revenge is transformed by spiritual release. The psalmist's cathartic expression of desire for revenge represents a first step toward his or her relations with the victimizers. It is an alternative practice — a glimpse of a new way of being in relation.

Of course, the promise for those who live in exile is no more a crushing of the enemy than it is a nostalgic return to yesteryear, for that home is irreversibly gone and our enemies do abide in the land we seek to co-inhabit as 'we', not a 'them' and 'us.' Perhaps the exilic mission then, and the home for which we yearn, is an arena in which God's good intention is decisive and it transcends all our known categories. The good news of God creates new social possibilities beyond the shrunken horizons of defeat and submissive docility. The alternative practice for exilic mission is to remain fixed upon what may yet come, what may yet be possible. But, in the meantime, our fixation upon these visionary impossibilities allows us to pay less heed and allegiance to the world's wearisome possibilities and to work at providing actual glimpses for others of what really is possible – a world in which no one is in exile and all are included and at home in the heart of God.

Conclusion

An exilic mission, then, departs from the ideology of the exilic land — from militarism that produces fear, from consumerism that ends in satiated despair, from greed that breeds brutality, from marginalization and discrimination that ends in isolation. This exilic mission has little to do with geography, but has everything to do with defiant memories, respectful engagement with difference, and alternative practices that liberate us from vengeful responses and send us on our way singing of a new way of being in relation with one another. We carry inside of us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home that beckons us. We sing of newness of life and the promise that we belong to God and are intensely cared for – that we are God's people among all God's people. Have you any pluck? It is a mission 'possible'.

Notes

1. Winnie the Pooh, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1926, copyright renewal, 1954.
2. Cited in Miguel A. De La Torre: A Cuban Reading of Psalm 137, p. 2 at www.temple.edu/gradmag/spr98/delatorr.htm
3. Walter Bruggemann, Cadences of Home (Lousiville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 3.
4. Bruggemann, p. 10.
5. Wheatley, Margaret J. Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), p. 27.
6. Beverly Wildung Harrison, Making the Connections (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 14-15.
7. Martin Luther King Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Bros, 1958), p. 134.

An address by the Rev. Dr. M. Jean Stairs, National Chaplaincy Conference, Correctional Service of Canada, June 24, 2004 The Reverend Dr. M. Jean Stairs is the Principal of the Theological College at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

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Jean Stairs is the tenth theologian and the first woman to serve as Principal of Queen's Theological College. Her appointment represents a historic moment. Within the Association of Theological Schools there are 237 accredited schools in the United States and Canada, in which only eight women are chief administrators with positions of President or Principal. Within Canada, Jean Stairs is the third woman to serve as Principal of an ATS accredited school, and the first woman to serve as sole Principal of a UCC theological school accredited by ATS.