

Last weekend a curious verse from the prophet Jeremiah prompted a brief history lesson. I spoke about the northern kingdom of Israel being crushed by the forces of mighty Assyria and the effective eradication of the ten tribes, who were pushed out of their homeland and out of history to enter the world of legend. The Assyrians marched many of the Israelites away to the east, and brought other peoples into Israel. Those who were able to remain inter-married with the new-comers and the Samaritans were the result.

Some of those northern folk escaped to the south and found a new home in Judah. They took with them their stories of their beginnings and their ancestors, and some of these tales would eventually be retold among the stories of the south in what would eventually become Torah, Instruction – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

Just over a century later there was a further upheaval when the forces of Babylon, under Nebuchadrezzar, laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed it. The king was made to watch as his sons were killed and then his eyes were plucked out, so that the last image he ever saw was their deaths. He was then taken to Babylon and exile with the leading men of his court, the advisers, the priests, the scribes, the educated and the (once) wealthy. They were forced marched to Babylon, retracing backwards in part the path taken by Abram, who had settled in Haran in northern Mesopotamia, before being called by God. It is a long way, and many must have died along the way in a tragic pattern that would be the path of Jews too often down the centuries.

The shock of exile for a people who had lived in the knowledge that God had given to Abraham and his descendants this land for ever was traumatic. In ancient belief your national God protected you. If the nation was defeated then their god had been defeated, and the only proper course of action was to accept the greatness of the foreign god and worship him. But how could God's chosen people worship gods whom all their prophets had mocked as useless, idols of wood who can neither hear nor see nor smell?

By the rivers of Babylon, they lamented; refusing to sing a song of the Lord on alien soil. Ezekiel, the prophet of the exile, imagined God's great throne as a fiery chariot with wheels, so God was a mobile God, not limited to one geographical area of the world, but Lord of all the world and all nations, and so still their God.

A generation after the exile, the Persians had defeated the Babylonians and Cyrus, the foresightful king, decreed that the exiles could return and rebuild their holy place, the Temple. But the Jewish people had assimilated. Many now had Babylonians names. A second generation does not remember the old places and the old ways. And return was a long way, an arduous journey. Few made the effort. Subsequently, generations

later, Babylon would produce one of the great works of Jewish literature and scholarship, the Babylonian Talmud, a commentary on the Scriptures; it would be an essential aid to the Jewish faith surviving after the final destruction of the Temple by the Romans. So the Jewish people learnt to sing and worship and write about their God on foreign soil.

The few that returned had a mighty task ahead of them. Not least they had to live among a people they despised. Those who had continued to inhabit the wasteland that Judah had become were traitors they thought; while the people of the land thought themselves to have kept alive the ancient faith. Trouble was inevitable. Led by Zerubabel, a Babylonian name for a descendant of the House of David, and Esra the Scribe and Nehemiah the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and the Temple re-dedicated; though many were dissatisfied with it. "Just not like the old one," the moaners said.

The return was remembered with a rosy glow by the prophet Baruch. He shares the name of, but is unlikely to be, the scribe of Jeremiah, the prophet who pleaded for the leaders to save the city by giving in to Babylon. An appeal that nearly cost him his life several times.

Baruch imagines Jerusalem as a bride, dressed in wedding robes, with fine jewellery, looking to the east to see the exiles returning. They left on a forced march; now they return as princes. God has flattened the hills and filled in the valleys in a great engineering enterprise so that their path is smooth as on a super-highway, but shaded by forest and every fragrant tree, as if they are in air-conditioned luxury coaches fit for royalty.

A wonderful vision which captures the meaning of the return: God's people are returning to the Land for God, despite appearances, is a Faithful God; a God true to his promises, even though his people disobey and deserve punishment, his wrath does not last for ever.

The truth was a motley band, exhausted from the journey, would have dragged themselves with aching limbs up the final, crippling climb from Jericho to Jerusalem; and would have found no welcome when they got there.

As we heard in the Gospel, the evangelists use the imagery of hills laid low and valleys filled in to announce the coming of God to his people. The picture captures the meaning. The reality was a motley group of workers, led by an odd-job man who proclaims the Kingdom of God is now present among you. It takes faith to see beyond appearances. It always has.