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The Babylonian Captivity of the Church

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In the Holiness Church that I attended as a child, Babylon was code for “the world”, marked by a toxic mixture of sensuality, and oppression. We sang about it in “testimony services”, urging everyone to “Leave Babylon”.

It took some relearning, therefore, to adjust to the usage on the streets of Handsworth some years later as I worked in community development, where “Babylon” was the Police, as the embodiment of the State, and the oppressors of Black people.



And still the meaning of Babylon is diverse and disputed. Is Babylon a place where the people of God are taken as punishment for their rebellion and apostasy, or is it a place, where under the continued care of God, they experience a purging and renewing that makes them able to be more nearly the “holy” people that God wants them to be?

In Babylon the people of Israel have time to think about how they came to be in such a situation, and they acknowledge that they had been warned repeatedly by the messengers of God, but they had ignored the warnings. Babylon is a place of seeing how things really are: a place of **RECOGNISING AND REPENTING**, sometimes with deep lament.

As they hear the Babylonian stories of how the world came into being, the people of Israel realise that they have a different story that has been passed down from generation to generation, and they write down that story so that it will not be lost. Babylon is a place of **REMEMBERING AND RECORDING**.

It is in Babylon, without the Temple and without the historic leaders that Israel begins to discover a new way of understanding their relationship with the rest of humanity, and a new way of being the people of God. Babylon is a place of **REORDERING AND REBIRTH**.

All of this reminds us that the God who is everywhere, is also in Babylon. God’s redemptive work continues through political upheavals and geographical transitions. Our Story is of a God who is there even in the direst situations.

But believing that God is “in” every situation does not suggest that all situations are “of God”. At its worst, Babylon becomes the embodiment of the values that

are not in line with, or are even directly opposed to, the will and purpose of God.

The “culture” of Babylon is described in different ways by Tom: “serving the god of consumerism” (p.32); “luxury, sensuality, sexuality, seduction and allure” (p. 32); “a culture of oppression and seduction” (p.33); “sponsors violence and war” (p.33); espouses “self-assertion” rather than “self-sacrifice” (p.37).

This is not to say that everything in Babylon is bad, but it does recognise that Babylon has a different agenda and a different orientation. Babylon acknowledges no God beyond itself.

As with “Babylon”, so perhaps, “captivity” is a term that also requires further reflection. Captivity implies involuntary restriction, and boundaries maintained by the use of power. This is not how I would describe the situation of the Church in relation to Babylon.

Undoubtedly there is some CONFUSION about the Church’s relationship with Babylon, and quotations are used as slogans in a campaign: we are to be “in the world, not of the world”; we should “let the world set the agenda”; we must practise “incarnational ministry”.

It’s possible, also, to see signs of CORROSION AND SEDUCTION and seduction. Tom asks, “Could it be that the culture of Babylon has so permeated and compromised the Church that it has ‘darkened our understanding’ (Eph. 4.18)?” He adds, “We cannot confront the sins of Babylon without confronting ourselves; it would be like biting the hand that feeds us” (p.62).

At the heart of Jesus’ ministry was a conviction that the world as he experienced it day by day, was not the way that God intended it to be, or wanted it to continue. Jesus, in his teaching and preaching, and in his miracles, offered glimpses of how things could be different and invited people to live in the new way that he was opening up.

There was a marked contrast between the way of life that Jesus presented, and that which was advocated by the most devout people of his day. The forces that he seemed to challenge most consistently were the attitudes of indifference and hardness of heart that allowed injustice and suffering to continue unchallenged and un-remedied.

This is the song that we need to rediscover and re-learn. In doing so, we will find that it chimes with the song of John Wesley, who tellingly described the purpose of his preachers as “to reform the nation, in particular, the Church, to spread Scriptural Holiness over the land.”

This is not primarily about teaching codes of conduct (though moral and ethical guidance will have a place) it is much more about living in communities that are justice-seeking, service-giving, and characterised by joyful celebration, and mutual care and accountability.

Babylon, as an alternative empire, does not feature prominently in the vision of Jesus or of John Wesley. Perhaps we miss the point when we focus too much on “the strange land” and too little on “singing the Lord’s song”.

We are where we are; and where we are, is where we are called to sing.

We are not the composers of the song; the song is given. But it’s OK to play around with the pitch, the rhythm, the instrumentation, the arrangement, according to local circumstances and need; the important thing is that we sing!

There will be several challenges to face as we sing our song. The concepts on which our song is based are no longer commonly understood, and where they are understood they are not readily accepted: the conceptual framework on which Jesus and John Wesley could build is no longer present in our day. Sin has been abolished; righteousness is despised; judgement is disputed; God is denied.

We need to discover, urgently, new ways of describing the maladies of our world, and to use words that reflect the sense of brokenness, alienation, despair, dividedness and loss to which news reports bear testimony every day. The words we use must ‘carry meaning’ for the people with whom we communicate, and resonate with their deepest feelings and experiences.

With the diagnosis of ills, there has to be also the affirmation of signs of health and wholeness; a recognition of generosity, self-giving and self-sacrifice wherever these are found. Praise, exultation, and joyful communal celebration will find their place here; but they need a focus and a ritual that can be recognised and shared.

The song finds its climax as singers engage in transformative action: pulling down the mighty from their thrones; bringing justice to the oppressed; feeding the hungry; comforting those who mourn. It’s a song whose power will prevail ultimately, as those who seek transformation are themselves transformed.

“The future of the Church in Britain will not be determined through spectacular events of earthquake, wind and fire, but by something much less obvious – a gentle whispering sound”. The sound of people singing?

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