

LEADING IN EXILE

BY JOHN DUNNETT

It is widely agreed that we no longer live in Christendom. Yes, it is still the case that the Church of England is established, the Monarch is the Defender of the Faith and we have Lords Spiritual in Parliament. However, much has happened to suggest that things are substantially different to even a generation ago. The possibility of disciplinary action against employees who witness to and pray for people at work, the suspension of Christian Unions on university campuses, the dismissal of a trainee social worker from a course for expressing orthodox Biblical positions on Facebook and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in English Law are all individual indications of a larger and society-wide change in culture and expectations.

It was Max De Pree who suggested that one of the tasks of the leader is to 'define reality'. To that extent – and in our context – this suggests that part of the role of local church leaders is to identify and name the substantive transformation that is taking place in our culture and society. Having named it, they must then model and show the congregations and communities for whom they have a responsibility what it means to live as faithful Christians in this new and changing context.

One of the metaphors which helps us in this is that of exile. Whilst we cannot draw a direct and exact parallel between our context and that of exile in the Old Testament, there are nonetheless lessons that we can learn from Judah's experience arising from the Babylonian conquest in 597 BC and her subsequent exile.

In particular, it will be of help to local church leaders (ordained and lay) to consider (a) the nature of exile and how it shapes/molds the context in which leadership is expressed and (b) its direct or specific implications for leading in mission.

(A) The Nature ('Anatomy') of Exile

In the first instance the leader in exile discovers that his/her values are now contrary to those of the dominant culture. In the story of Daniel, his unwillingness to embrace pluralism in bowing to idols was in stark contrast to the behaviour demanded of him by his surrounding culture.

Secondly, the voice of the leader in exile is not so much irrelevant as positively unwelcome. Babylonian



exile could not grant Daniel a pluralistic freedom – rather it demanded of him allegiance to the official culture.

Thirdly, although there were moments and periods when Daniel was able to participate in and engage with Babylonian society and in particular its royal court, his faith over time did more to mark him out than to enable him to integrate.

(B) Leading in Exile

Whilst it is true that many reading this article will still enjoy the legacy benefits of Christendom (occasional offices, school assemblies, recognition and respect of clergy and bishops in many communities) it is likely that the experience of exile will increase for many local church leaders in the years to come. And so we need to ask how it is that leaders can be prepared for and exercise leadership in such a changing context.

HOPE

Firstly, leaders in exile need to be those who bring hope. In the place where people feel alienated, disempowered and at 'dis-ease' with the surrounding culture and context, the human heart and spirit need hope. It is interesting that in Peter's first letter (written to those in exile – 1:1) he very quickly reminds his readers of the 'living hope' that is theirs (1:3). Peter appreciates that the first need of the exiled community of believers is to have their hope strengthened.

There are an increasing number of everyday church members and disciples who are feeling 'under pressure' for their faith. As secular institutions, academia and public life drift from any Christian moorings they had it is easy for people to lose confidence in their Christian hope.

DISCERNMENT

Secondly, in the place of exile, leaders need godly discernment. In a nutshell, the challenge is to know where to live on the engage/disengage spectrum. In Daniel 1 we see that this was something he wrestled with – presumably engaging with Babylonian literature, culture, art and other activities but drawing a line over his royal diet. Bible commentators offer a whole number of suggestions as to why this was so – but the essential point for our purposes is to note that, under God, Daniel discerned that this was where he needed to make a stand.

Over the years Christian leaders have had to consider whether or not to make a stand on a number of issues: the re-marriage of divorcees, Sunday trading, lottery money and so on. It is my conviction that leadership in the years to come will need an increasing measure of godly wisdom in order to discern over the issues of engagement/disengagement.

THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

Thirdly, when it comes to local churches and mission and evangelism, leaders will need to model and shape the witness of the Church for this new and challenging context. It is wonderful to see how God used people like Daniel and Esther for kingdom purposes even in the most challenging of situations. But they had to learn how to conduct themselves and lead others differently from the leaders before them when, under the patriarchs, judges and kings there was a different relationship between faith, state and people.

COST AND SACRIFICE

Finally, leaders in exile need to help others to make sense of the cost and sacrifice that is part of holy living in an exilic context. Daniel's insistence to Nebuchadnezzar (3:18) that even if God does not save us 'we will not serve your gods' indicates a profound sense of trust in God's sovereign rule even at personal cost. Such leadership is the hallmark of those who will fruitfully lead the Church in exilic times. It is possible that over time church leaders (ordained and lay) will increasingly be seen as more subversive than irrelevant and our insistence that there is only one name under heaven by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12) will mark us out as intolerant, extremist and even dangerous. The calling to be leaders will necessitate a willingness to pay the price.

Whilst it is good to pray that God will have mercy on our country and enable thousands (and hundreds of thousands) to come to living faith in Christ, we must at the same time be preparing our hearts and nurturing others to lead in a context and culture that appears to be increasingly at odds with Christian values and beliefs. Let's therefore pray (like Paul for the Ephesian elders) that God might strengthen and encourage us by his word of grace (Acts 20:32).



FOR REFLECTION

1. In what way does reference to Judah's exilic experience challenge/feed/inform your understanding of the leadership to which God has called you?
2. How do we as leaders bring and build hope into the faith of those for whom we have a responsibility?
3. What are the issues over which you think you might, as a leader, need particular discernment in the months/year to come?

