

Study Leave Report – Rev. Caleb Hardie

November 2021

Topic: Exile and the Pandemic

My study leave included a six-week online retreat through Abbey of the Arts entitled: “Exile and Coming Home – *An Archetypal Journey through the Old Testament.*” I chose the retreat as ‘spiritual food’ and it very much was but as time went on it also became the basis from which to examine ‘Exile’ in terms of our experience of the Pandemic. There are certain events that have a way of permeating and influencing all other experiences, and I think the Pandemic is one of these inescapable defining moments in time for all of us!

Between 597 and 587 BCE many Jewish people were taken from their homeland as captives to Babylon, following their defeat as a Nation in the Jewish-Babylonian War and the destruction of King Solomon’s Temple. This period in captivity is known as the Exile and much of the Biblical narrative draws on this experience. Many of the prophetic writings and Psalms were written through the lens of Exile, the events leading up to it, life in Babylon as an exiled and scattered people, and upon their long-awaited return to Jerusalem in 539 BCE. The Exile was a defining period in Israelite history. In many respects Exile has been a part of the human condition since our origins and the Biblical story captures something of the quest to return to a feeling of connectedness, to home, to God, and to wholeness. Over time the term Exile has been used to describe the experience of any person who is forced away from their home and unable to return for legal or other reasons. I think the Pandemic is a kind of exile-like experience of displacement for us today and like the people of the Bible we too need to locate God in the midst of what we are encountering. To do this I think involves a shift in perspective, the kind of shift Jesus called for in the first public words that he is recorded as saying: *Metanoete*. St Jerome (4th Century) translated this Greek word into Latin as *‘paenitenta’* which means “repent” or “do penance” initiating as Richard Rohr writes: “...a host of moralistic connotations that have shaped our understanding of the Gospels ever since.” The Greek imperative verb *Metanoete*, however, literally translates as “change your mind” or as Rohr terms it: “*Go beyond your mind.*” (The Universal Christ). I wonder if the experience of Exile and this Pandemic is one which calls for a change of mind, a renewal of outlook so that we might have *the mind of Christ* (1 Corinthians 2:16) as we live in and through this time of Exile.

I began my study leave on Day 49 of Lockdown in Auckland and concluded it on Day 97. The borders were closed, the shops were shut (they are opening as I write this) the streets largely empty. The timing of my leave had already been re-worked so that I could lead Zoom services at Albany Presbyterian Church through Level 4 and into Level 3. I had delayed in the hope of a Level 2 reprieve for both myself and the church before commencing. It soon became apparent however that we were not going to come out of this Lockdown with any haste! And so, with the blessing of my Session and a high calibre of service cover in place it was agreed that I would go on study leave following the Inaugural Online General Assembly, some 4 weeks later than originally planned. The Silent six-day Ignatian Retreat was off the agenda (hopefully to be picked up again next year) but my six-week online retreat through the Abbey of the Arts was downloaded and ready to go.

Taking Study Leave while in Lockdown has been a somewhat strange experience. It took me some time to release myself from the guilt of stepping back from the Parish during this trying season – would people feel abandoned in their hour of need I wondered? Would this time be useful given all the restrictions on movement that were in place? Already missing being in the presence of others was I heading for a self-inflicted Exile? With such questions floating around my head (and heart), I began the retreat and as the days wore on the gift of this time became more and more apparent. Each day involved a reflection, reading scripture through the process of Lectio Divina, time spent in prayer and journaling on what I was discovering. Much of it was deeply personal. In this report I offer a glimpse of the journey and reflect on the Pandemic as an Exile experience.

A friend recently asked me about what I was studying and when I told him the topic was: *Exile and Coming Home*, he replied: “*What is Exile?*” I found it an interesting exercise answering that question. I paused realising Biblical terminology would be lost on him and instead sought to explain in contextual language he could understand and hopefully resonate with. Exile, I said, is an experience of disconnection/separation from home or what is familiar, what we know and rightly or wrongly have come to trust. In Exile we find ourselves longing for what once was and a return to ‘home’. We find ourselves grappling with how we might live, survive, even thrive in this strange new space we find ourselves in. Lockdown has been and continues to be an exilic experience for us all. Fortunately, my friend’s eyes had not closed! In fact, he seemed to get it and we spent time sharing something of what we were discovering through this time.

We long for pre-covid days, don’t we? Assuming of course that our lives were enjoyable before! Some people live forever in an exilic-like state and Covid is just another expression of how life is ‘not as it should be’. Some of the resistance to the Government-lead response has come out of this dissonance felt in parts of society around issues of equity and hope that were being felt long before Covid arrived. The question however for a people experiencing Exile is: How are we to live? What ought we to hope for and work collectively towards? What are we learning through this experience? Who are we missing along the way? Slowly, but surely, we are coming to the realisation that we will never return to what ‘once was’ and maybe that is a good thing. Maybe this is an opportunity to address issues that have been ignored for too long. At any rate we are different now, there are new edges and disconnects to contend with – vaccinated and unvaccinated for one, and this experience of the Pandemic is shaping our lives in ways we could never have imagined before.

I know I have a renewed appreciation for many of the freedoms I had taken for granted. I have a renewed appreciation for community and being in the ‘actual presence’ of another person rather than their virtual presence! I have also gained a deeper understanding of how connected we are to one another something the field of Quantum Physics has long understood. Our desire for wholeness ought not to come at the cost of someone else’s or at the cost of Creation. And so, the questions for those living in Exile become: How do we live faithfully in this space? How might our experiences of this Pandemic enable us to become *more* loving, compassionate, and gracious rather than closed, narrow, and intent on protecting self-interests? I hoped my study leave would provide me with some answers to these questions!

Each week focused on a different theme as it relates to Exile.

Week One: Anger

Interestingly the journey into Exile begins with anger. Through the stories of Amos and Hagar and the Psalms I was invited to consider what was worth getting angry about and to examine my own anger when I have felt exiled and at odds with what was taking place in the world. Amos raged against the oppression of the rich over the poor, he raged against inauthentic worship and the hypocrisy of those waving their religious credentials while ignoring the pain of those they were called to love and care for. Amos reminds the people that everything is connected: *"Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land: Shall not the land tremble because of this, and all who dwell in it mourn?" (Amos 8:4 & 8a)*

Covid had already brought this truth home to bear, and the Delta variant even more so – all things and all people are connected under God and when suffering befalls the poor and vulnerable, Creation suffers too. The expression of our faith – the living out of what we believe, must include justice and wholeness, and 'right-ness' towards all people. That was the invitation I heard through Amos. It was something Jesus lived as he stood up for and beside the poor, the outsider, the sinner, the broken and all who were in need.

Who might I/We be called to stand with/for in this Pandemic? What are people angry about? What should we feel angry about as faith communities? What might this time of Exile from normal life have to teach us about wholeness and our human connectedness? How can we live faithfully through this season? These were the questions I wanted to grapple with over the coming weeks.

Engaging with the Psalms can be a helpful way of navigating this terrain. The Psalms remind us of the importance of lament and anger as a way of expressing our disorientation and disconnect with the brokenness that is evident in our world. Richard Colligan writes: *"The Psalms are full of rage and ecstatic joy and heart-breaking sadness – the whole range of human experience."* The Psalms help us to lament, to express that sense of *all is not well!* Richard Rohr calls this form of lament, disorientation. And part of what our lament and anger highlights is the need for change. Something is ripe for change – maybe even a whole society. Anger can be seen as 'movement energy' when understood in this way.

A lot of anger is being expressed amongst people in response to the Pandemic, isn't it? Anger at the ways in which it is being handled by those attempting to lead us through it. But what exactly are we angry about? The loss of freedom we have been experiencing is an exilic-like experience. Life is not as it should be. We grieve for what we had, we look for somewhere or someone to blame, we despair, and we rage with psalms of our own. What I learnt though the first week's reflections, through Amos and Hagar and Psalm 109 was that this anger needed to find expression but that the way in which that was done made all the difference. There are usually patterns to our anger, energy either given or taken, cycles of thoughts that repeat and understanding these patterns can help us to discern whether the movement and change we desire will be brought about by the way our anger is expressed or not. How do we rage at 'all is not as it should be' in such a way that it brings about positive

change? How might our anger reflect a sense of justice and a desire for wholeness for all people not just ourselves?

Week 2: Contemplation

This week included an invitation to contemplation through the stories of Hosea and Gomer, Mary and Martha and Psalm 87. How might we live deeply through our experiences of exile? A key question for the contemplative is: What if there is more going on here than I think?

Ronna Detrick says that 'Contemplative' might better serve us an adjective rather than a noun, a characteristic more than a practice. She offers an interesting reflection on the familiar story of Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus while Martha busies herself in the kitchen before complaining about the lack of help from her sister. Ronna reflects on Jesus' comment to Martha that Mary has discovered the *"one thing worth being concerned about"*. Ronna observes that we are both Mary and Martha at the same time rather than one or the other. We are busy and distracted, and we are also present and reflective, and we move between these two states constantly. A vital dimension of one's spiritual life is balancing confidence with unknowing. Contemplation keeps us in touch with both. To be contemplative is to learn to concern ourselves with presence – with basking in God's attentive gaze, being present to God's grace, and to God's love and acceptance of us. As John Valters Paintner writes: *"Being a monk in the world is not about being saintly, but about adhering to religious practices that help us move closer to the being God calls us to be and naming our wounds so they might be healed."*

As part of the week retreatants were asked to consider a painful Exile-like experience from their past and to share not the details of the pain, but rather the lessons that others could learn without having to endure the pain. As I began to contemplate this I wondered if such lessons could ever be learnt without suffering. Could these two things even be separated? One of my greatest learnings is that suffering can be one of life's most astute teachers!

But I do love the thought that my children and perhaps even others, might learn from my own mistakes that led me into a kind of forced exile rather than having to go through the pain themselves. So here are some of the lessons/truths I have learnt the hard way:

1. Humility – an awareness of your own brokenness and not-right-ness amid broken systems and other people's failings is vital. A lack of it can lead you into Exile. Learning it – can help lead you out.
2. The importance of a gentle non-confrontational approach to bringing about lasting change.
3. Face to face is the key – don't work through pain, frustration, anger or vaccinated-unvaccinated issues via 'written mediums' – you have to 'see' the person so their presence can inform your response.
4. Running away/leaving may be the right thing to do (see the story of Hagar) – but the problems that are 'ours' will inevitably come with us.
5. Understanding our own cycles and patterns especially in response to conflict or hardship is valuable. Do I bottle things up? Do I distract myself with vices? Do I run

away in search of greener pastures? Do I blame others? Do I get depressed? Do I shut down?

6. What we do impacts upon others – more than we realise. “No one is an island unto themselves.” (John Donne)
7. It is important to have clarity about our anger/movement energy. What is the change I am wanting? Will my responses help to bring about this change or will they lead to deeper pain and dissonance?
8. Exile/wilderness experiences are lonely, barren, hard, painful. They are also gift – places of healing, where wisdom is born. Exile is the place where we are found and ‘seen’ by God.

John Valters Paintner says that: *“Most of us learn the hard way in life: from our own mistakes. If we’re lucky, we might learn the easy way: from the mistakes of others.”* Contemplating our lived experience of this Pandemic is a worthwhile exercise – it helps us to live deeply through it confident in what we know but also able to accept the ambiguity and unknowing that is shaping this new season we find ourselves in.

Week 3: Silence

Ezekiel was called to preach just before the Babylonian Invasion and the coming Exile but interestingly he is told not to use words and instead to convey God’s purposes silently through active expression. This goes on for more than a year! Despite these restrictions Ezekiel perseveres, even though he has been told the people won’t listen. His greatest strength during this time was action, not words. French Composer Claude Debussy said: *“Music is the silence between notes.”* Ezekiel found a way to express God’s wisdom in the silence between the words.

I find myself wondering about the role of silence in my own life and in this experience of Exile/Lockdown. How might silence also become creative movement as Debussy suggests? Ezekiel reminds us of the importance of silence not as ‘in-action’ but as movement. What are the moments in our lives where being quiet would be a far better and memorable response to a difficult situation?

Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry was to a people whose experience in and through Exile had left them blind and deaf to the word of God that leads to life. How often does suffering and dissonance leave us closed to what God is doing? Like Ezekiel we are called to be involved in a healing process to open eyes that *“do not see”* and ears that *“do not hear”* (Ezek 12:1-2) not just via our words but also through our actions. How might we convey the truths of the Gospel through creative silence during this Pandemic?

During our Zoom services at APC (Albany Presbyterian Church), we wave to one another as a sign of our sharing the peace of Christ – these waves and the smiles that accompany them convey a great deal! We are learning how to love one another in this new space we find ourselves in.

Through this retreat and other spiritual practices like Lectio Divina and the weekly Body Prayer I have been learning the gift of silence and surrender. It helps me to become centred, grounded in God, and to trust in times of difficulty – times when I feel exiled and

long for a restored world and a restored life for all. *“For God alone my soul waits in silence.”* (Psalm 62:1).

I think Lockdown has involved a kind of silence for all of us and with it a sense of restlessness at our inability to do the things we usually do. But as I learnt in this retreat silence is not nothing. It is a powerful something. Quiet is disconcerting for some of us – it can be uncomfortable and dark. But it can also lead to new insights and a sense of peace and hopefulness. I was struck by the words of John Valters Paintner as my week of wrestling with silence came to an end: *“Monasteries, groups of monks and nuns living a collective religious life have their origins in the hermit tradition. These holy men and women sought solitude and silence to focus and deepen their faith in God. If we are going to follow the call to be a monk-in-the-world (what I believe to be the next step in the monastic tradition), silence must be an integral part of it. The challenge is how do we, who live permanently beyond the cloistered walls of a monastery, find time and space in the near constant noise of modern life just to be silent? Make silence a priority. If you don’t, life will fill the silence.”*

The question that arises is how we might take what we are learning in this ‘different space’ of Lockdown/Exile into the return to home – to our new normal as restrictions are lifted and life resumes? We do not want to miss what God is teaching us through this time of Exile – we want it to shape the way we move forward. The practise of silence is one of the ways we become awake to what God is up to in our lives and in our world.

Week 4: The Hopeful One

In Ezekiel 37 we read the familiar story of the dry bones coming back to life. *“Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Listen! I will make breath enter you so you may come to life.”* All of Ezekiel’s silent and somewhat crazy actions prior to the Babylonian invasion suddenly begin to make sense – as he transitions from pre-exilic warnings to being an Exilic-prophet who offers hope to the people. Those living in Exile may have lost God’s favour, their land, and their temple, but there is still hope! There was a way back (or is it forward?) and Ezekiel begins to speak to this possibility. It is not hard to think of times in our own lives when things seemed completely lost and hopeless but became the start of something new. Those times when we discover God’s unexpected gift in our moments of suffering: *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.”* (Ezekiel 26:36) As if to say this time of Exile is not the final word nor is it just a matter of waiting for things to return to the way they were before Lockdown – something new is occurring, and something new is coming!

But it isn’t always easy to maintain our hope, is it? We become weary especially when what we are hoping for is taking an age to be realised. Will we ever return home, to a sense of normality, will we ever get out of this locked-down state? These are questions for people experiencing Exile. Psalm 27 captures the ‘perspective whiplash’ we so often go through as the Psalmist expresses hope and strength and then fear and despair before returning to a place of hope and confidence in God’s goodness. In Hebrew the words for ‘light’ and ‘fear’ are similar and the Psalm begins with reference to both, highlighting the relationship between these two very human experiences. Richard Colligan writes: *“Today we sometimes hear a theology that suggests we need to conquer our fears in order to live faithfully. But the Psalms were written primarily by and for people in exile and in great suffering – underdogs with little hope for survival. Faith can look different in different seasons.”*

These Psalms speak to our experiences of this Covid Pandemic and the exile from 'life as it once was'. They offer us a way of expressing our fears while holding on to hope. A way to live out our faith in this new landscape we find ourselves in. Psalm 27 resonates with our feelings of uncertainty for the future – we are fearful and resistant to change but we are also hopeful and open to new possibilities – sometimes at the same time! Eugene Peterson helps to reframe our understanding of these exile-like challenges in the following prayer:

"I refuse, O God, to live fearfully or cautiously. I name my fears one by one and turn them over to you. With lifted head I will live in your light and salvation. Amen."

Having a deep well of resources to draw upon in our times of darkness and exile can enable us to not only survive but even flourish in a dry season. I have sought to increase my toolbox over the years and found great comfort and renewed hope in times of difficulty in Ignatian practices of reading and prayer such as Composition of Place and Lectio Divina. *"In Ignatian contemplation we form the habit of losing ourselves...in sacred words of great significance. After some initial practice, we learn how to stay with the scene and its actions, to relax in the presence of those who speak and move, and to open ourselves without reserve to what occurs, so that we may receive a deep impression of the events mysterious meaning."* This is from one of my go-to books, "The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything" and can be applied to not only how we read the Scriptures but also to how we read and perceive our exilic-like experiences. What are our deep impressions of this time in Lockdown?

Spending time journaling and in contemplation, even in silence, has helped to sustain me. Through this retreat I have also been introduced to a new form of prayer – the Body Prayer. In body prayer you learn to move in tune to the scriptures you are reflecting on – like a stretch or gentle workout session for the body, soul, and mind. It takes some getting used to! But the more I have practised it the more I have felt rested and renewed. It too has become a 'discovered gift' of this time and a way of dwelling in God's presence.

Week 5: Dedication

In Nehemiah 8, the recently returned Exiles gather near the Water Gate in Jerusalem and call upon Ezra the Priest to read God's Word to them and to interpret it so all can understand. Ezra read from the Book of Law to remind this returned people of their history, their laws, their stories and why their ancestors had committed themselves to God. When Ezra had finished reading the people recommitted themselves to one another and to being God's people, overjoyed to be back in their spiritual homeland once again.

The annual Festival of Sukkot commemorates this event. Jews set up tents where they sleep and eat (where practical) for 8 days. One of the most important aspects of this remembrance aside from the reading of the Torah is the inviting and receiving of guests which is seen as a great blessing to both parties. I imagine that this too will be a 'great blessing' for all of us when we can receive and be received in one another's homes again. Perhaps it won't be until that moment that we truly feel that our Exile is over?

How might this remembering and recommitting that Ezra talks about help to shape our returning from Exile? What are the stories we will want to remind ourselves of? How might we dedicate ourselves afresh to being God's people in the world after all we have been through and experienced? How is this Exile shaping us as faith communities? Will our faith look different going forward?

John Valters Paintner, suggests that our challenge as we journey out of Exile is to contemplate not just who we are dedicated to, but how we are dedicated. He asks: "*How is our dedication made manifest in the world and in the lives of those around us?*" Too often our dedication can blind us to the wider consequences of our actions, and the exiled become the exilers, the oppressed the oppressors. What might this mean for the church as we grapple with issues of safety as we seek to reconnect? How do we celebrate newfound longed-for freedoms without oppressing the unvaccinated or those afraid of re-gathering because we have tried to be inclusive of all?

In each week of the retreat Richard Colligan offers one or more songs reflecting on a piece of Scripture. In week 5 he reflects on Psalm 101 as a song of the dedicated one. With a host of 'I will' statements Psalm 101 reveals a hostility towards habits that prevent goodness. To be *dedicated* means there will be some things we have to say 'no' to, some things we will need to stand against, and those decision will inevitably not please everyone. Our dedication may call into question our commitment to other things. Richard captures some of this tension in his song "Love and Justice". The English word *Integrity* in Psalm 101 is a translation of the Hebrew word *Tamim* which means whole or complete. The song is about the desire for completeness in this Hebrew sense of the word.

*"Two feet walking, love and justice,
rugged journey
Inside, outside, full attention,
circle sweeping*

*Love and justice, love and justice
Bring us
to wholeness*

Like the ideal King described in Psalm 101, we want to embody God's love and justice in our interactions with others. We too want to be clear about what we are for and what we are against. We want to offer a resounding *Yes* to all that is good, and an emphatic *No* to all that would diminish life – our own and our neighbours. If we understand our desire for integrity in terms of wholeness as the Hebrew *Tamim* suggests we recognise as Richard says: *The drive for personal integrity is about what brings wholeness for everyone.*" How might the decisions we make as churches moving forward bring wholeness for everyone?

Week Six: The Call to Action

In the Book of Nehemiah, we read about life after Exile, about how the Jewish people were getting on now that they had returned home – and the news wasn't all that good! When Nehemiah learnt how some of the returned Exiles were treating their fellow Jews, he wept. He wept in front of the Persian King and Queen that he was still working for who in seeing

his distress asked how they might help. Aided by the compassion of these foreign dignitaries and with assurances of their authority, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem as the newly appointed governor to attend to the complaints that have been made. He gets straight to work, putting right wrongs and settling grievances within the community, before mobilising the people to work together to rebuild the city. He even provides food for some of the workers out of his own pocket. It is a wonderful example of practical faith in purposeful action and a reminder that our returning to what we long for doesn't mean everything is suddenly right and good.

The recently returned Exiles had taken on habits learnt in Exile including those visited upon them by their Oppressors such as the charging of interest. Nehemiah says: *"What you are doing is not good. Should you not conduct yourselves out of fear/reverence of our God rather than worrying about what our Gentile enemies think?"* (Nehemiah 5:9)

Perhaps we might ask: How will our response to this Pandemic including how we work through vaccinated and unvaccinated issues reflect our faith, our reverence of God's ways rather than the popular opinion of the day? They could be the same, but they probably won't be! The story of Nehemiah reminds us to attend to the small things as we seek to live more fully and wholly once again, to be a people of God's Kingdom and to let that inform how we live in and through and out of this Pandemic.

Richard Colligan rightly observes that: *"Choices made consistently become habits. Habits cultivate patterns that forge character and what we choose is shaping who we are becoming, and it happens on a slow, long arc."* Time spent on this retreat has helped to bring this truth home to me. As it says in Ecclesiastes 3 *"there is a time for everything."* A time for anger to be attended to, a time for contemplation, a time for silence, a time for hope, a time for dedication, and a time for Nehemiah-like action. As I come to the end of my study leave and begin to anticipate a returning from Exile, the following questions arise:

What are the small pragmatic steps we can take to systematically work towards our spiritual goals?

What can we choose to attend to, what habits might we cultivate so that our actions and thoughts reflect the priorities of the Gospel?

What obstacles stand in our way?

What support do we have to share the burden of these tasks?

This time has indeed been a gift and the well upon which I draw for sustenance feels deeper, my toolbox fuller as a result – it has been a very personal journey but one that has brought home to me my connections to others. What we do impacts upon others and the Pandemic has brought this truth home in an emphatic way. The decisions we make as individuals are lived out in community. As Richard Colligan asks: *Is individual integrity possible without communal support?*

The call to be a monk in the world is I think the call to live deeply, with discernment and compassion, justice, and mercy. It is not a call to withdraw from community but rather to

immerse ourselves in it as people of the Kingdom of God. In community we make space for each unique life to speak and for God to be revealed more fully. Living in Exile or under the pressure of a Pandemic can make this particularly challenging – the needs of the individual often rise to the fore despite the shared experience. But there is a special kind of wisdom that is born in such times if only we have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts open to receive. No one wants to go into Exile (I'm talking about the Pandemic here not the joy of taking study leave!), and yet there are some lessons that can only be learned through such an experience. Our disconnects and the dissonance we feel reminds us that life can be better again, not just for us, but for everyone – this is after all the good news of Jesus Christ – life in all its fullness for all of Creation.

Amen – may it be so!

Rev. Caleb Hardie