



For I know the plans I have for you



Exile is about alienation and reconciliation writes **Alison Morgan**.

Exile tells us that God is creating a home for His people. So let us not be in too much of a hurry to find a home. As Christians we are meant to be exiles; we are citizens of heaven and not of the places on earth in which we find ourselves living . . .

Exile: from a Latin term meaning banishment. Banished from one's native country, separated from one's roots, forced to live as an outsider. Exile may be to a place of comfort or discomfort, that is not the point; exile is about not belonging, not having a home. Exile is, I have come to believe, one of the most painful and powerful aspects not just of human experience but also of the human condition. And as I think about it, I find I have a question. Exile: a disaster, always without benefit, a cruel twist of fate for the unfortunate; or something deeper and more profound than that?

In 1301 Italian politician Dante Alighieri found himself in Rome, representing his native city of Florence as part of a delegation to the Pope. In his absence, an invasion, an overthrow and a sentence of exile – at

first temporary, eventually permanent, and revoked, if you please, only in 2008. Dante was devastated. Wandering between the courts and palaces of northern Italy, he began to write; first political and philosophical letters and treatises, eventually the description of his fictional, visionary

towards a God whom eventually he met in a crowning, cascading, overwhelming vision of light and life. A few weeks later, he was dead – released from a diet of salty, foreign bread and from the daily penance of treading up and down other people's stairs, as he had put it; released

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journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise which became one of the great masterpieces of world literature. Exile turned Dante into a poet, a poet who reached through his pain, through the ravages of conflicting emotions and ardent longings, into the presence of those who had loved and guided him in his quest for something stronger, something purer, something more – eternal.

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been a theme of literature, too: if passion cannot be expressed in deeds, then perhaps it finds an outlet through words, for whilst deeds can be placed in chains, words cannot. From Ovid to I B Singer, exile creeps onto the page. And yet circumstance alone is not enough to explain the enduring nature of the theme – try a search on Amazon, and you will find one popular contemporary novelist after another writing from the freedom of a western, choice-laden, free society about exile. In a way I am not surprised, for exile has been part of my free, western experience too: removed by God and marriage (too long a story) from the beckoning security of a Cambridge lectureship (special subject: Dante) to a steel town leached of colour by a dearth of both jobs and aspirations, I began a life which for years left me feeling that home was somewhere else. Now I find myself living in a place where I have no connections, no memories, no roots; and yet here I feel for the first time as if I have indeed come home. There is more to exile than meets the eye; something deeper than surface circumstance, something paradoxical, something which does not just dismiss but also calls.

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In many parts of the world exile is a journey not for single individuals but for whole people groups. I think of Africa; in the last half century people have walked the length and breadth of the continent, fleeing from oppression, hunger, disease: Mozambicans, Sudanese, Rwandans, Zimbabweans, Angolans, Ethiopians, straggling for miles along paths of pain, fleeing from one another, carrying their children and their old people with them, bargaining with their feet for the right to remain alive. I have known some of these people, been admitted momentarily into their fractured past, cried and prayed with them, thanked God that I have been spared their experience.



Neither I nor most of you who read these words have known anything like this. And yet increasingly it is said that we too, we who are the people group of Christ in the comfortable West, we too are living in exile: that we share not the physical hardship of enforced flight but the spiritual alienation of a people living as strangers in a world to which we no longer belong. It has become commonplace to recognise that society has moved on from the church-centred Christendom in which we used to live; whereas for Dante church and politics, faith and daily life were inextricably one, now we, the people of God, the tribe of Jesus, have lost our place at the centre of things. Many of us are still in the same place as we were, meeting together, gathering to worship God, seeking His will and his presence and his kingdom. But society around us is not in that place. It has adopted other values. The temples of our age are those of consumerism, the call to our young is for a spiritual reality which can be invented and purchased, and vision is not a momentary entry into Paradise but a way of ensuring business success.

It seems, then, that exile is an intrinsic part of modern life, for individuals, for people groups, for the followers of Jesus. One of the best ways to understand and navigate the present is to look carefully at the past – so what can we learn from history, and in particular from our own history

as the people of God, to help us make sense of this experience?

A Biblical view of exile

The Bible begins and ends with exile. From the expulsion from Eden to the isolation of Patmos, Biblical reality is marked by exile; exile has always been, it seems, at the heart of human experience. From the beginning the people of God are voluntarily or involuntarily on the move – moving, yearning, returning. Abraham is instructed, Jacob compelled to move. Joseph is sold to foreign masters, and eventually his family are forced by famine to join him in Egypt. Initial welcome and prosperity becomes slavery and servitude, what began as refuge turns into exile, and Moses is called to lead their descendents out again in a dramatic series of events still taught and sung about in schools and theatres today.

This is the Exodus, remembered even now by the Jewish people in the Passover, an event which prefigured a later, more eternal solution to the human predicament, to the problems engendered by both Eden and Rome: the Cross itself. And yet terrible, formative and awesome as this experience was, it faded into the past – until the people of God, comfortable now in their Promised Land, once again faced exile, this time through a Babylonian invasion which peaked in the year 587 BC.

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Deported in their thousands, comforted only by the singing voices of their prophets – the same prophets whose warnings they had ignored – the people of God began to reflect as never before on their history, their identity, their Creator.^[1] It was a formative period – this is when oral tradition first took written form, a form which focussed not solely on events but also on relationship. What did it mean, for the exiled people of God, that they were the people of God? What did God require of them? For what was He rebuking them, to what was He calling them? For in the midst of pain their prophets continued to sing of a fresh beginning, of streams of water which would bring life to the desert of their experience.

The story ends, for us, in Jesus. The people of God are reformed around the person of Jesus, people ‘called out’ to be part of the fellowship of Christian believers which we know as the Church. For the first time, exile becomes a choice. To be a Christian means not to experience geographical isolation, but rather to

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voluntarily walk away from the illusory home of a society not focussed on its relationship with God, into a new identity as – and Peter uses the same phrase used of Moses – a resident alien.^[2] It had all been there in the story of Eden; but we had forgotten it. Exile is not fundamentally about geography, for our true home, it turns out, is not geographical but spiritual. The writer to the Hebrews recognises this – in recognising that we are strangers on earth, we acknowledge that our true quest is not for an earthly homeland but for a heavenly one.^[3]

Exile as a dynamic: patterns and lessons

In all these experiences of exile there is a pattern, a pattern in which exile is but the middle part of a story in search of an ending. In my steel town I learnt, eventually, to depend upon God. In the distant palaces of northern Italy Dante crafted, eventually, an astonishing, enduring poetic vision in which reality fell into place and he entered, for one inexpressible moment, into the mind of the Creator. In Mozambique people walked back from Tanzania and Malawi, the lands of their exile, bringing the gospel with them and triggering an ongoing resurgence of faith. In Babylon the Hebrew people found out who they were; exile became the crucible of their faith and ultimately the foundation stone of our understanding of the Cross.^[4] It is out of exile that new futures are born.

So is it arrogant to compare our fragmentary and comfortable experience of living somewhere we do not belong, our collective experience of living in a secular culture, with the painstricken exodus of whole peoples? I think not: it’s the same phenomenon, played out on a different stage, a small version of something much bigger. Loss, exile and restoration are not isolated events but part of what it means to be human; exile is a metaphor for human

reality. The Old Testament prophets made the link – told to live out the pattern of their people, straining to speak an alternative future from the depths of a crushed experience, they knew that what flowed through their lives in small flows through our lives in large, and both echoes and foretells what it means to be human in an imperfect world. Exile is the geographical expression of an eternal dilemma. Only through the experience of exile do we glimpse what is to come, do we learn that what began in Eden will end in Jerusalem. Exile tells us that God is creating a home for His

people. Exile is about alienation and reconciliation.

So let us not be in too much of a hurry to find a home. As Christians we are meant to be exiles; we are citizens of heaven, as Paul puts it, and not of the places on earth in which we find ourselves living. We are ‘resident aliens’, called to live as people with a foot in another world, people walking into an alternative future; Peter uses the word *paroikos* – from which we get our word ‘parish’.^[5] So we, the humble parishioners of England, are God’s people, chosen and called not to make ourselves comfortable but to travel, to suffer, to learn, to depend; and as we do so to proclaim the mighty acts of Jesus. It is through the experience of exile that we become authentically human. **r**

Notes

^[1] The story is told in 2 Kings 24-25 and Jeremiah 39 and 52. The pain of the experience is poured out in Lamentations and in Psalm 137. But the major, astonishing, soaring voice of the future was Isaiah, whose words reached far beyond present geographical reality into a new salvation history: Isaiah announces not just Jerusalem but Jesus.

^[2] Acts 7: 29 (echoing Exodus 2: 22); 1 Peter 2:11

^[3] Hebrews 11:13-16.

^[4] JA Sanders, ‘Exile’, in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed G A Buttrick, Abingdon Press 1962, vol 2, p 188.5

^[5] Philippians 3: 20 (citizens of heaven), see also Eph 2: 19; 1 Peter 2:11 (‘aliens and exiles’).

Images



Page 8 Gustav Doré, Dante and Beatrice gaze into the Empyrean, *Paradiso XXXI*. Public domain.

Page 9 Sebastiao Salgado, the exodus from Ethiopia to Sudan, 1987. Carrying all their belongings, the women keep an eye out for the surveillance planes that come and machine-gun columns of refugees. From *Africa*, Sebastiao Salgado, Taschen 2007.

about the writer

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