**How Shall we Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?**

Migration is not a new phenomenon. It is a biblical reality. There are several biblical stories in both the Old and New Testaments which articulate the experiences of migrant and host communities. For our biblical reflections I have chosen three passages from the Bible.

The first is the Book of Ruth. We will look at Ruth with particular focus on the host community. Naomi is the host here. The second text is 1 Peter, which is a letter to the dispersed and migrant Jewish Christians. The third text is Isaiah 50, a song from the diaspora. We shall ask what kind of a song we sing, whether as a migrant or as a host community.

**Ruth: “Seeking a Home for the Foreigner”**

The book of Ruth is post-exilic, even though the story is set in the period of Judges. This context is important. The message of Ruth casts doubt on the wisdom of Ezra-Nehemiah’s attempt to throw all the foreign wives out of the restoration community of Israel. The story provides a dissonant voice. This suggests that *God's redemptive work draws aliens in* and does not cast them out! Nehemiah suggested putting away foreign wives but Ruth suggests welcoming the foreigner and even marrying her!

In a human and practical sense, what is the story of Ruth all about? I like to think that it is about “seeking a home for Ruth” (3:1). 'Home' can also mean a place where one finds rest and security. So NRSV translates it with 'some security'. But this is not about Ruth seeking a home for herself but Naomi seeking one for her. Without Naomi, Ruth is helpless. That is how migrants feel in their new land. Unless *the host community seek to find a home for the migrant community*, the migrant group will never find a secure home. The host community should make it their mission to *empower the powerless visitor*.

'Home' is an important concept here. One can view home as kinship - husband, father etc. 'Home' could also be taken as hospitality to the strangers. In the Jewish tradition, the book of Ruth is read during the Feast of Weeks in May. It connects with the acceptance of Torah by the children of Israel. Together with the strong theme of God bringing them up out of Egypt there was emphasis on being merciful to strangers, orphans and widows. God provided for you and now *you must mirror God's faithfulness* by providing for the strangers.

Naomi's own experience taught her that finding a home for herself in another community is not easy. She was a migrant in Moab. She survived some tragedies but could not find a home there. So she made the same conclusion every migrant is tempted to make - I will *find a home only in my own land*. This is not my land. So she decided to go back to her own community and asked her daughter-in-laws to go back to their own communities. Here you see the danger of the disintegration of family life because of the failure of the host community.

Back in the Israelite community of Bethlehem, Naomi is part of the host community and Ruth a foreigner. The community in Bethlehem is projected in the story as a successful host community. Naomi and Boaz are not isolated individuals as other members of the community also play key roles. Boaz protects and takes care of Ruth when she gleans in his field. He does not take advantage of the young woman on the threshing floor. He tells the young men not to disturb her - protecting the migrant from abuse.

Boaz agrees to marry her even though she belongs to an enemy people. The characters in the story show the same type of *faithfulness and loyalty that God alone usually expresses*. This community stands as a model for an ideal host community.

As the story progresses there is increasing appreciation of *the value that the migrant member has brought* to the host community. Ruth's hard work is particularly commended. We know that this apparent alien becomes the agent of Redemption for Naomi and the whole of Israel. We need to recognise the 'despised other' as an agent of blessing for the host community. A healthier approach to the migrant community will acknowledge the blessing they bring to the host community. Migrants today keep many inner city churches alive. They *bring Redemption for the host* church/denomination.

It is not just about offering a home for the ‘other' but also about being touched, challenged, transformed and blessed by them. Indeed Ruth ends up in the list of ancestors of David and Jesus!

The host community often has to *take a great risk*. Naomi actually takes a great risk in bringing a Moabite woman to the Bethlehem community, particularly when Naomi herself was ‘homeless’ in one sense. She was a returning member of the community who had spent a long time as a migrant elsewhere herself.

Even though our focus was on the host community we cannot end our reflections without thinking of the God who directs human movements to fulfil his purposes. The sovereignty of God plays a substantial role in the story. *God uses human movements*, including migration, in order to fulfil his purposes and for the blessing of the humanity.

Naomi, Boaz and their community as well as Ruth acted as agents of Gods redemptive love by embracing the other. This is God's mission. Our mission too.

**1 Peter: “Making a home where we are sent”**

1Peteris addressed to a Diaspora Community, to “the exiles in dispersion”1:1) and “the exiles and aliens”(2:11) The fairly strong language and sentiment used in the letter together with geographical references reflect a special exilic situation. We are looking at the dispersed Jewish Christians in the late first century or the beginning of the second century. The people are not at home in their current context. They are where they are because of forced migration from Jerusalem not because they chose to go there for economic or social reasons. One difference with a modern migrant community's experience is that there is no Christian host community here. The host communities are entirely non Christian and are hostile to a great extent.

*The Question of Identity* (1:1-2:10) The community is alien, despised and strange but at the same time 'chosen' and 'destined by God. It is sanctified by the Holy Spirit and 'protected ' by the power of God.(1:5) These are like 'living stones' (2:6) being built into a spiritual house. They are built by God. Their movement is part of God's building work even though they are despised and rejected by the indigenous people.

Identity is a big issue for a migrant community. Identity is partly constructed by political, geographical and economic factors. When we are out of our own contexts we struggle to understand our own identity. Our faith can help us to understand ourselves to some extent. Our sense of being called and guided by God can help us to realise our identity not merely on a cultural and linguistic basis but in terms of God's purpose.

*Eschatological Hope*. Our sense of identity is a source of motivation but there is also an eschatological hope that motivates every exilic community. The community in this epistle has the hope of salvation (1:9), looking forward to the city of God. This is conceived as the completion of the ongoing work of God. This perception helps us to make a home where we are.

The hope of this community is slightly different from the hope of the exilic community in the Old Testament. The Old Testament diaspora looked forward to returning to the homeland. But the community in 1Peter is not hoping to return home. They are in there to stay. The migrant experience in modern Europe is closer to this model, rather than the Old Testament model.

*Resistance*. “Do not conform”. Do not try to replicate the host communities in its ‘settled’ or ‘arrived’ behaviour. In migrant communities ‘unsettledness’ can be a positive gift. The people in the diaspora are on the move, despite the fact that they have physically arrived where they are. This ‘unsettledness’ can contribute positively by resisting the temptation to settle down into a social niche; and this resistance can be a basis to build an alternative world and to make a contribution to the common life

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This alternative world is one of mutual love (1:22), practised within ‘oikos’ (household 2:15). ‘Household’ is about collegiality, solidarity and mutual support. In one sense, ‘household’ is a safety net. But the epistle does not encourage the forming of an exclusive ghetto.

*Integration*. The epistle does not encourage the migrant communities to shut themselves away from the majority of the population. 2:11-3:12 advises them to live within the structures of the society. This involves accepting human authorities and institutions (2:13), giving due respect to everyone (2:17), and putting others to shame by one’s own gentle, good conduct (3:16).

This process is one of mutual witness not assimilation of one into another. The diaspora community is called to be a ‘missionary presence.’ It is not called to preserve its culture in a foreign land but to be a gospel witness where it is planted. For that to happen, the community should be open to the witness from the host community and to its own transformation. The diaspora community has this opportunity to witness, thereby gently challenging and transforming the host community.

*Suffering*. It is natural for the community in exile to experience suffering; being not at home itself is a form of suffering. The epistle advises the readers to understand suffering as sharing in Christ’s suffering (2:18ff) and as a way of experiencing solidarity with others (5:9). The challenge is to turn suffering as an act of solidarity both with Christ and humanity, and an opportunity for witness and transformation.

The author does not encourage the victim mentality which is often embraced by migrant communities. We should not be viewing ourselves as objects of someone else’s action. When we take suffering as solidarity with Christ and humanity and act upon this conviction we become subjects, not hapless objects. Our suffering can also become ‘redemptive’ just as Jesus’ was.

*The church is a pilgrim community* by its calling and definition – we are ‘called out.’ We should always be in diaspora. It is a pity that we settle into immovable and unchangeable fixtures of dominant culture. A part of the mission of the migrant churches is to challenge those (the host churches?) who think that they have ‘arrived’. Prove them wrong, unsettle them so that both the migrant and host communities can journey together.

**Isaiah 50:4-9: “How do we Sing in a Strange Land?”**

This is a song from what scholars call ‘Deutero-Isaiah”, the second part of Isaiah, in which the intended readers were Jews in Babylonian exile.

And this text is part of one of the ‘servant songs.’ We do not need to go into the debate about the identity of the servant here. From the songs we know that he is someone trusted with the task of sustaining the exile-weary community in Babylon, of helping them recover from trauma, and enabling them to accept anew their divine call to be partners in redemption.

The speaker is not in exile. Then how can he sing for the exiles? We should not ignore several allusions to the abuse and personal suffering of the speaker. The suffering of the speaker here has profound implication for us. The community is in despair, the speaker is responding with hope while at the same time facing not only the same discouragement as the rest of the community but also the additional layer of frustration of the ineffectiveness of the message and the backlash from others.

This is how the message of hope in exile has to be proclaimed. Neither shallow optimism, naive cheerfulness, nor wishful thinking prepares one to know and speak with conviction about hope, comfort and grace. If the church today is serious about preaching a message of hope to those in exile, she must experience exile – its pain and powerlessness. Then we can sing the song with the exiles.

*It is a song in the making*. We can improvise this song only by listening. “Tongue of those who are taught”(v.4 in Hebrew text) suggests less speaking. The following verse says “the Lord has opened my ear.” We must listen to everything and everyone involved in a time of trial. The question is whether the church is listening.

*It is a song of perseverance and resolution, not cynicism*. “I did not turn backward” (v.5). “I gave my back to those who persecute me“’ (v.6). “I did not hide my face” (v.6). There is no despair, no turning back. We should move on from our perpetual mentality of despair. Despair shows the limit of our imagination. Instead we need resolution. We need to learn to get stuck in it, persist with our message, and live out or message. We will then be singing with authority, humility and honesty.

*It is a song of vulnerability* because we sing in the context of insecurity. Living with insecurity means trusting a future that is not known in advance, only glimpsed in part through the spirit of hope and the eyes of faith.

“God is the one who goes to the periphery” (Kosuke Koyama), the place without honour, prestige and power. The ‘periphery’ is the place of exile. This is where God pitches a tent in order to identity with human pain and struggle. The church today has to reconnect with this vulnerable God, so that we all can sing together as vulnerable people but with confidence, courage and hope.

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? First we recognise that we all, whether host community or diaspora community, are in a foreign land. It is part of the church’s calling to be in exile! Second we follow God to the edge, to the periphery and thereby experience vulnerability. Then we will be able to sing together with others the song which is still in the making with perseverance and resolution.

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