

# Along the track

## Living in Exile

Deep down, each of us has a longing for God. Sometimes it nags at us, other times we take it for granted, other times we just put it aside, some say they don't feel anything like that at all. But we all have a restlessness, a sense of incompleteness, a desire to do something else, a sense of wanting more, of seeking to better ourselves in some way, and that's where God finds us.

When we realise that the roots of our faith lie with a nomadic people we can understand that a little more. Our father in faith, Abraham was called by God to leave his home country with his extended family 'to the land that I will show you'. Imagine doing this when you are 75 years old. The Bible simply reports, "So Abram left, as the LORD had told him." (Genesis 12:4) Abraham surely felt some anxiety, not just about leaving home and the journey ahead. Up until then, in the culture to which Abraham belonged, worshipping many gods was the usual practice. So why did he do it? Why did Abraham and his household begin a long, difficult journey to the land God promised. Was it a desire for something better for his family and himself, something to satisfy this inner restlessness? Age doesn't diminish that.

Imagine walking perhaps 10-20 miles a day, your entourage needing to find food and water for both animals and people. You must defend yourself from bandits along the road and the people through whose land you must pass. You must endure harsh weather and difficult sandstorms. Other people owned the land you were promised so you move into a land no-one wanted, the Negev Desert, the waterless, barren, unpopulated land of the Arabian Peninsula. Living in tents, you have no home of your own.

Trusting in a God he had only just come to believe in, Abraham and his family survived by wandering from place to place. Surely this situation must have felt pointless at times. But Abram's faith was steadfast, his commitment undiminished, his search urged him on.

Abraham's faith is found not in how he coped with being depressed or defeated or disillusioned or whatever else he may have felt or what he thought, but in what he did. He believed in this God who invited him to step out into the deep, even though the promise had not yet been fulfilled, even though the situation sometimes seemed hopeless. He trusted.

When Moses led the people out of slavery and exile in Egypt, wandering around an inhospitable terrain, it wasn't long before some complained – we want to go back to Egypt, we might have been in slavery but it was better than this! But Moses persisted.

Is this our time of exile? Is this time when God is calling us to new frontiers, to live on the margins? Are we being called away from our roots, from those things that appear to have sustained us, to have given us comfort (or made us too comfortable?) and direction? Like those in exile of old, do we too at times feel a deep sense of loss and mourning for what we once had, the way things were, perhaps disappointment or even anger. Or, like some others who journeyed with Abram and Moses, are we perhaps impatient with things as they are, dissatisfied perhaps, wanting to move on? Or have we given it all away? What stage of the journey are we on?

We too are meant to be in exile. We are wanderers, seekers, eternally searching. This isn't our final destination. Possibly the times we live in may heighten the tension that accompanies exile. Our faith is under scrutiny, our beliefs questioned even derided, our way of life challenged. Scandals of sexual abuse and the abuse of power in its many forms have rocked the Church. Our message is not popular in the modern world – rather than being seen as challenging, life-giving, it is often regarded as outdated. So do we grumble like those Moses had saved or do we remember that transformation happens in exile because quite often it is the only time God can get through to us, if we are open to that happening. Sometimes we get too comfortable with the status quo, too set in our own ways and, more importantly, not open to the ways of God.

More than once God called the Israelites into exile. These were very painful and confusing times, but always they were ultimately characterised by a deep longing for reunion with God – not necessarily a return to the old ways because often that was why they were called into exile, to get past those times? Do we give God a chance, do we spend some time to reflect, to be in God's presence? Perhaps we need to stay with this pain for a while and let it transform us, to live with uncertainty, to be open to where God might be in our world today, to be open to where and how God may be calling us.

Regards  
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