

# 1 SELF-IMPOSED EXILES

## THE MEMORY: GOD WILL RESCUE HIS EXILED PEOPLE

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*I know that men in exile feed on hopes.*  
– Attributed to Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.)

*They have exiled me now from their society and I am pleased, because humanity does not exile except the one whose noble spirit rebels against despotism and oppression. He who does not prefer exile to slavery is not free by any measure of freedom, truth and duty.*

– Kahlil Gibran

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This book is written for those Christians who find themselves falling into the cracks between contemporary secular Western culture and a quaint old-fashioned church culture of respectability and conservatism. This book is for the many people who wish to be faithful followers of the radical Jesus but no longer find themselves able to fit into the bland, limp, unsavoury straight-jacket of a church that seems to be yearning to return to the days when ‘*everyone*’ used to attend church and so-called Christian family values reigned. This book is for those who can’t remain in the safe modes of church and who wish to live expansive, confident Christian lives in this world without having to abandon themselves to the values of contemporary society. This book is for those Christians who feel themselves ready to (or yearning to) jump ship, but don’t want to be left adrift in a world where greed, consumerism, laziness and materialism toss them about endlessly and pointlessly. Such Christians live with the nagging tension of being neither at home in ‘the world’ nor in the church as they’ve known it. Is there some way of embracing a Christ-centred faith and lifestyle that is lived tenaciously and confidently right out in the open where such a faith is not normally valued? I think so but it will require a dangerous departure from standard church practice.

It seems that the church is still hoping and praying that the ground will shift back and our society will re-embrace the values that it once shared with the Christian community. But for many of us and for those to whom this book is written this hoping and praying is a lost cause. We acknowledge that the epoch of history that shaped the contemporary church has crashed like a wave on a shore and left the church high and dry. That epoch is known as the Christendom era. Christendom has moulded our churches into their current form and abandoned them to a world that is completely over it all. I’m not the only voice and certainly not even the most original voice declaring that Christendom is over and we too need to get over *it!*

Christendom is the name given to the religious culture that has dominated Western society since the fourth century. Awakened by the Roman Emperor Constantine it was

the cultural phenomenon that resulted when Christianity was established as the official imperial religion, moving it from being a marginalized, subversive and persecuted movement to being the only official religion in the empire. Whereas followers of Jesus had once met in secretly homes and in the underground catacombs, now they were given some of the greatest temples and meeting spaces in the empire. They were literally handed the keys of the Roman kingdom. As G. K. Chesterton was noted to have said, "The coziness between church and state is good for the state and bad for the church."

By the Middle Ages, church and state had become the pillars of the sacral culture, each supporting the other. Even where there existed conflicts between church and state, it was always a conflict *within* the overarching configuration of Christendom itself. Christendom had by this stage developed its own distinct identity, one that provided the matrix for the understanding of both church and state. It had effectively become *the* meta-narrative for an entire epoch. A meta-narrative is an overarching story that claims to contain truth applicable to all people at all times in all cultures. And while the Christendom story no longer defines Western culture in general, it still remains the primary definer of the church's self-understanding in almost every Western nation, including and perhaps especially the United States.

This meta-narrative not only defined church and state, it defined all the individuals and social structures in its orbit of influence. Members of this society were assumed to be Christian by birth rather than by choice. Christianity became an official part of the established culture of the empire. In some countries, the king or queen actually became the head of the church. In Germany, the church actually became a function of the state. The net effect over the entire Christendom epoch was that Christianity moved from being a dynamic, revolutionary, social and spiritual movement to being a static religious institution with its attendant structures, priesthood and sacraments.

Taken as a socio-political reality Christendom has been in decline for the last 250 years. So much so that contemporary Western culture has been called by many historians (secular and Christian) as the *post-Christendom* culture. Society, at least in its overtly non-Christian manifestation, is 'over' Christendom. This is seen in isolated debates and struggles like prayer in schools or the PC innovation of renaming Christmas as a solstice gift-giving festival. It can also be seen in the removal of nativity scenes from shopping centres or the revocation of the normal rights and access to cultural events afforded to church leaders. When Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore placed a 2.6-ton granite monument to the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the Montgomery state judicial building he had no idea just how dead Christendom was, even in the South. Sure enough, two years later U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ruled that the monument violated the U.S. Constitution's principle of separation of religion and government. Church attendance continues to decline across the West, nowhere more obviously than in Europe and Great Britain. At best, individual Christian congregations are respected and encouraged to continue their practice of corporate worship, but taken as a whole the church is experiencing a sharp and dramatic deterioration in its influence and impact on Western society.

In the United States, mainline Protestants have never been a majority but now number some 22 million out of a population of 228 million. Even more troubling than the size of the church today are the results of George Barna's American church surveys. Following the September 11 attacks, Barna asked a nationwide cross-section of Americans what they believed about issues associated with morality. While a majority denounced the terrorist attacks as evil, only a tiny minority (15% of adults and 4% of teenagers) actually believed in something called "absolute moral truth." Even among those who claimed to be 'born again Christians', fewer than a third of adults and fewer than a tenth of teenagers believed in such a thing.<sup>1</sup> The survey also found that for most Americans, religious faith is no longer a primary moral and ethical guide. Asked on what basis they make moral and ethical decisions, by far the most common response was "whatever feels right or comfortable in a situation" (38% of teens and 31% of adults). By contrast, only 13% of adults and 7% of teens said they would make decisions on the basis of principles taught in the Bible.

It is noted by Stuart Murray that the church in the UK is in even worse shape. According to Murray, if the current rate of decline in church numbers in the UK continues "*the Methodist Church will have zero membership by 2037... the Church of Scotland will close its last congregation in 2033... the Church in Wales will be unsustainable by 2020.*"<sup>2</sup> He also reports on the sad fortunes of the Salvation Army in the UK as well as an accelerating decline in the Church of England, leading him to announce that the UK is certainly well and truly in the grip of post-Christendom, which he defines as:

Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.<sup>3</sup>

For many Christians all this has been a matter of deep grief. There is barely a congregation or a Christian organisation that has not publicly bemoaned the waning impact of the Christian story on American or Western society. And while many Christian voices are calling us back to the days when the church did occupy a position of power and influence over Western society, nobody with any real sense of history believes that we can save Christendom. It has slid slowly into the sea and with it all our hopes of ruling the West.

Suppose that when the Fall of Rome happened around 410AD there was a small band of specialist Roman road builders supervising the construction of a Roman highway through what we now call Wales. In fact, imagine that you're one of these Roman road builders committed to creating one of Rome's greatest weapons in the conquering of the ancient world. Without roads, Rome's massive armies cannot be mobilized throughout unfamiliar and otherwise unpassable routes. Rome succeeded to expand in large measure due to her

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=106&Reference=A](http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=106&Reference=A)

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004, p.6

<sup>3</sup> Op Cit. p.19

master road builders. Now you find yourself far from home in a hostile and barbaric land. The road you have been constructing runs south-to-north across the Welsh peninsula. It was destined to carry Roman soldiers to barracks across Wales to continue to subdue local communities. Now you find that there's no such thing as a Roman empire anymore at all. The Vandals and the Visigoths have sacked Rome itself. You and your team of construction workers are cut off from home, having created a now-obsolete Roman highway. What do you do?

Surely this is the charge facing the church in the post-Christendom West. We have been building churches for an era that has slipped out from under us. The Christendom era, like Rome, has fallen. Now church leaders find themselves cut off and alone in an increasingly foreign culture that is antagonistic to them. The church no longer occupies the high ground. Christianity is believed by many to have been tried and failed. Says Mike Riddell,

The Christian church is dying in the West. This painful fact is the cause of a great deal of avoidance by the Christian community... Surely God will not let his church come to death? And yet the history of the church in North Africa teaches us that we cannot assume divine intervention to maintain the status of the ecclesiastical institution. It is not only possible for Christianity in the West to falter, it is apparent that the sickness is well advanced.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are other voices that express real hope. Not a hope in the reconstitution of Christendom, but in the idea that the end of this epoch actually spells the beginning of a new flowering of Christianity. The death of Christendom removes the final props that have supported the culturally respectable, mainstream, suburban version of Christianity. This is a Christianity expressed by the 'Sunday Christian' phenomenon wherein church attendance has very little effect on the lifestyles or values or priorities expressed from Monday to Saturday. This version of Christianity is a façade, a method of appearing like a fine upstanding citizen without allowing the claims and teaching of Jesus to bite very hard in everyday life. With the death of Christendom the game is up. There's less and less reason for such so-called upstanding citizens to join with the Christian community for the sake of respectability or acceptance. The church in fewer and fewer situations represents the best vehicle for public service or citizenship, leaving only the faithful behind to rediscover the Christian experience as it was intended – as a radical, subversive, compassionate community of followers of Jesus.

### **REDISCOVERING OURSELVES AS EXILES**

One such voice is the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann who finds many parallels between the contemporary Christian experience of dislocation, uncertainty and irrelevance and the experience of the Old Testament Jewish exiles in Babylon.<sup>5</sup> The Babylonian exile was an event that cast a long and dark shadow right across the history of Israel, affecting its theology, its culture and its religious life. At the time, Israel had split

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<sup>4</sup> Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson, Cathy Kirkpatrick, *The Prodigal Project*, London: SPCK, p.3

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997

into northern and southern nations and both had been at the mercy of the marauding Assyrian and Egyptian Empires. The Assyrians had seen their empire begin to unravel and the less powerful Egyptians were ready to pounce on the spoils. In the middle were the powerless nations of Israel and Judah. However, like a storm in the east, the Babylonian empire was rousing and would eventually become so powerful as to sweep aside both the Assyrians and the Egyptians, capturing the Jewish nations in the process.

The death of Judah's King Josiah in 609BC occurred as the Assyrian Empire was breathing its last before the advancing might of Babylon. The Egyptian forces decided to assist the Assyrians against their greater threat, the Babylonians, and on their way east they took control of Judah for four short years, between 609 and 605. The Babylonians, however, were expanding too rapidly for Egypt to contain, and during the reign of Jehoiakim the tiny nation of Judah would totally lose its independence to Babylon and finally disappear into the Babylonian Empire.

After an agonising siege in which she was the only city in Judah to resist the Babylonian might, Jerusalem was finally razed in the summer of 587BC by Nebuchadnezzar's superior forces. And then began the humiliation of living as exiles on the foreign soil of their conquerors. Carted east in a massive repatriation program, the Jews were allowed to live in their own settlements in the capital and other Babylonian cities. They were free to build houses, earn a living and keep their own customs and religion, but they could not return home to their desolated capital. Jehoiakim and his family were 'guests' in Nebuchadnezzar's household and some Jews rose to high positions in public service. Many became so accustomed to life in Babylon that they refused to return to Jerusalem even when much later there was an opportunity to do so. They had settled into the foreign soil and Jerusalem held no allure to them.

The experience that faced the Jewish exiles mirrors the church's experience today. In fact, the biblical metaphor that best suits our current times and faith situation is that of *exile*. Just like the Jewish exiles, the church today is grieving its loss and struggling with humiliation. The ground has slipped out from under the church. She has lost her footing and needs, as Brueggemann puts it, to express a resentful sadness about what was and now is not and will never be again. The passing of Christendom might be compared to the fall of Jerusalem and there is no going back. Exiles feel like a 'motherless child', that is, abandoned, rootless, vulnerable, orphaned. Brueggemann cites such biblical material as Lamentations as expressing the honest sadness of an exilic people. But most pertinently he warns that the danger in exile is to become so preoccupied with self that one cannot step outside oneself to rethink, reimagine, and redescribe larger reality. Such self-preoccupation very rarely produces energy, courage or freedom. What exiles yearn for is an invitation to live "freely, dangerous and tenaciously in a world where faith does not have its own way."<sup>6</sup> And here lies the root of the problem of the church today. Victimized by nostalgia, buffeted by fear, the church is focused too much on merely holding the small plot of ground it currently occupies to confidently reimagine a robust

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, 1997, p.10

future. The result is a retreat into some fundamentalist us-versus-them model, rather than “an endlessly cunning, risky process of negotiation.”<sup>7</sup>

I for one am happy to see the end of Christendom. I’m glad that we can no longer rely on temporal, cultural supports to reinforce our message or the validity of our presence. I suspect that the increasing marginalisation of the Christian movement in the West is the very thing that will wake us up to the marvellously exciting, dangerous and confronting message of Jesus. If we are exiles on foreign soil – post-Christendom, postmodern, post-literate etc. etc. – then maybe at last it’s time to start living like exiles, as a pesky, fringe-dwelling alternative to the dominant forces of our times. As the saying goes, “Way out people know the way out.”<sup>8</sup>

But if we can no longer rely on the buttresses built by Christendom what kinds of things will provide us a framework for reimagining or rethinking the future of the Christian movement? Again, Walter Brueggemann says that such exilic rediscovering will require the use of intentional disciplines that in every case are marked by danger:

*Dangerous memories* reaching all the way back to our barren mother Sarah.  
*Dangerous criticism* that mocks the deadly empire.  
*Dangerous promises* that imagine a shift of power in the world.  
*Dangerous songs* that sing of unexpected newness of life.  
*Dangerous bread* free of all imperial ovens; all leading to  
*Dangerous departures* of heart and body and mind, leavings undertaken in trust and obedience.<sup>9</sup>

It is my intention to use this framework as the outline for my examination of living as exiles in a post-Christendom world today. We will look at the dangerous memories that will sustain exiles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century before examining the dangerous promises and dangerous critiques required by them. Finally, we will attempt to learn some dangerous revolutionary songs for exiles

## **DANGEROUS MEMORIES**

Exiles are driven back to their most dangerous memories. The inoffensive, insipid stories we tell ourselves will fade away in the face of so stark an experience as exile. When the stakes are high, as they are when captive on foreign soil, exiles will fall back to their most potent memories. These are the stories that galvanise a people to action, that fill them with courage and provide them a framework for dealing with the issues of captivity.

At a time such as this the acid is applied to the Christian community, forcing it to return to its most elemental memories. Stories of the ‘good old days’ when everyone attended Sunday School, or when travelling evangelists commanded audiences of thousands, will

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>8</sup> Bob Kaufman, “Abomus Craxiom”, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*, New Directions Publishing, 1965, p.80

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann 1997: p.134

not do the trick. If our most dangerous memories revolve around a time when American Christians didn't drink or smoke or attend the cinema then we will only ever be moved to nostalgia, not to action. Israel's dangerous memories included the stories of radical departures embraced by Abraham and Sarah and by Moses and Joseph and Jacob. By following the impulses of God's will in their lives these great heroes spoke into the exiles' experience by demonstrating that God was present and powerful and active across geographic and cultural borders. They refuse to comfort those who would rather remain at ease in a foreign land. They unsettle the comfortable and rouse those yearning for a better day, a new day when God's name is vindicated and his people blessed. Exiles must resist on the one hand the temptation to forget completely and on the other to refashion more realistic and respectable memories.

Which are the Christian community's most dangerous memories? Surely they are the stories of the Incarnated One. The gospel stories, far from being the milky bedtime stories for baptised children, are the most dangerous element of the Christian experience. They are radical, daring, unsettling, disturbing, even frightening. Our memories of God's human manifestation will continue to perturb us, inviting us to an alternative set of values that transcends our normal allegiance to our post-Christendom society. The gospels are replete with stories that shake us out of our preference for the level-headed, reasonable memories the church often presents us with. Jesus is not level-headed, nor reasonable. Just when we imagine we have him sussed, boxed in, worked out, he wriggles free confounding our formulae and our simplistic explanations. Let's face it, the gospels aren't bedtime stories at all. Far from sending us drifting off to a careless sleep, they trouble us, forcing us to reassess the deals we have done with the spirit of this age.

An illustration of the power of such dangerous memory can be found in Stanley Hauerwas' book, *A Community of Character*. In that volume he exegetes Richard Adams' charming tale about travelling rabbits, *Watership Down*.<sup>10</sup> Adams' much loved book concerns Fiver, a small nervous rabbit, who develops a messianic hunch that something terrible is going to happen to their Sandleford warren. Fiver tells his brother Hazel and they try to warn their aging Chief Rabbit, the Threarah, without success. Hazel and Fiver, marginalised as doomsayers, decide they must leave, and are joined by other rabbits with such strange names Bigwig, Dandelion, Pipkin, Hawkbit, Blackberry, Buckthorn, Speedwell, Acorn, and Silver. As they make their timely escape their warren is destroyed by a housing developer's bulldozers. There is now no turning back.

So, the little band takes off across the countryside in search of a new home, Watership Down. As they make their escape they must court many great dangers, the likes of which rabbits never encounter. They must cross a stream, traverse a bean field, and negotiate an open road. These are obstacles that rabbits must never normally approach. Everything within the DNA of a rabbit tells it to stop running, to dig deep into the cool, cool earth. Every rabbit's instinct is to hide underground. For Fiver and Hazel and their band to continue across the fox-infested open fields, they must countermand their every natural impulse. How are they to do it? The answer lies in a surprising quarter. The one thing that

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981

unites the band and fills them with courage are the stories they retell themselves, stories they heard as babies at their parents' knees. These stories all concern the clever rabbit folk hero El-ahrairah. The first such story told in *Watership Down* is the story of the "Blessing of El-ahrairah"

This story is the account of Frith, the god of the rabbits, allocating gifts to each of the species. In the story, each of the animals receives the characteristics for which we know them – the fox receives cunning, the cat eyes that can see in the dark, and so on. El-ahrairah is too busy dancing, eating and mating and misses out on the best gifts. Realising that rabbits will now be at the mercy of all the other gifted creatures, Frith grants him strong hind legs for escaping and declares that all the world will be the enemy of rabbits. He declares El-ahrairah to be the prince with a thousand enemies and pronounces, "But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people will never be destroyed."<sup>11</sup> Such a story explains to Fiver and Hazel and the others the reason for their very being. It is their creation story and El-ahrairah is their hero. This story is more than a simple explanation for why rabbits have strong hind legs; it describes the rabbits' task in life. It is not to try to make the world safe, but rather to learn to live in a dangerous world by trusting in stories, speed, wit and each other. Says Hauerwas,

I suspect it is not accidental that this is the first story told by the rabbits that left Sandleford, as all new communities must remind themselves of their origin. A people are formed by a story which places their history in the texture of the world. Such stories make the world our home by providing us with the skills to negotiate the dangers in our environment in a manner appropriate to our nature.<sup>12</sup>

What keeps the rabbits running, searching for their new home? It is the stories of El-ahrairah, their dangerous memories. These stories fill them with courage and provide them with answers for the dilemmas posed by life on the road. Whenever the rabbits are confronted by a challenge, they stop and rehearse the stories of their folk hero, the prince with a thousand enemies. They are, as Hauerwas refers to them, a story-formed community, and it is the stories that spur them on, driving them forward to the safety of Watership Down.

So too the Jewish exiles in Babylon and the Christian movement today. We are a story-formed community. The Christian experience is not primarily formed by our liturgy, our doctrine or our ecclesiology, as important as they might be. We too are formed by the dangerous stories of our great hero. Just as the rabbits' instinct is to stop and dig, so too our very human instinct is to embrace safety, warmth and security. Our all-too-human impulses are toward being untroubled. We build houses, embrace respectability, and try not to stand out. We want to escape into the cool, cool earth rather than to cut out across the open fields, courting danger, negotiating challenges. So what will get us up and out of our safe warrens? What will continue to foster unease about being exiled in a post-

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Adams, *Watership Down*, New York: Avon Books, 1972, p.37

<sup>12</sup> Hauerwas, 1981, p.15

Christendom world? Surely, it will be the radical stories of Jesus, the prince with a thousand enemies.

Probably the most dangerous aspect of the Christ story is the very nature of the Incarnation itself. Jesus models that it is possible to be both God and human at the same time. This is for us, certainly, the most terrifying thought. Throughout history the church has retreated into deifying Jesus so thoroughly that the human Christ can't be seen. If indeed Jesus is too human (or barely human at all) he calls from me a worrying response. He challenges my humanness and demands more from me than I can imagine offering. An overly deified Christ reduces my perceived response. To this otherworldly, super-spiritual Jesus I simply have to offer my devotion, my worship, my adoration. By the grubby, human, peasant Christ I am challenged that maybe it is possible to be human and God-like after all. Nowhere in Scripture is this more disturbingly presented than in Jesus' return to his hometown after the beginning of his messianic ministry. There, Jesus began teaching in the synagogue and received what to me has always seemed a deeply shocking response. The locals, his old boyhood friends and neighbours, are offended and say:

Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things? (Matt.13:54b-56)

How distressing to us that Jesus could be the Messiah, the human incarnation of God, second person of the Trinity for thirty years and *no one at home noticed!* No one in Nazareth smiles knowingly and says, "I always suspected there was something strange about that kid." Instead they wonder where he got all this messianic stuff from. Somehow Jesus could be fully God and blend into Galilean society – hardly the most pious or sophisticated culture – without creating a ripple. This perspective on the Incarnation bothers us because it dangerously invites us to follow Christ in all his ordinariness as well as all his righteousness. The Incarnation demands that we neither retreat into a holier-than-thou Christian ghetto, nor that we give ourselves over to the values of secular culture. And let's be honest, that is the most dangerous place of all. It is easier to imagine and embrace a closeted fundamentalism that retreats into a Christ-against-culture mindset. We can picture Jesus there, all holy and pure, unsullied by the world around him. We can also understand the capitulation to our host culture that some Christians make. We know full well what it looks like when Christians abandon themselves to materialism, greed and selfishness.

When responding as exiles in a post-Christendom world we are used to seeing some respond with despair and grief (the fundamentalists) and others with assimilation to the dominant values. What is much more disturbing to us is the example of a God who does neither. He answers with a fresh, imaginative theological response. Jesus neither slides into compromise and sinfulness, nor does he fulfil our expectations of the holier-than-thou guru. The fact that Matthew (and Mark) includes the episode in their biographies of Jesus is remarkable. The story almost completely undermines claims about the divinity of Jesus. It is included because it is a dangerous memory for followers of Christ. We are

called, like Christ, to be godly, but we are expected to live it out fully in the midst of others. There is no more dangerous path than the one trodden by Jesus.

### **DANGEROUS CRITICISM**

Exiles must practice critical distance from their context. They must resist assimilation and refuse despair. Even though some Jewish exiles became very accustomed to the culture of their conquerors, settling into the cool, cool earth of Babylon, the faithful ones continued to practice a dangerous form of criticism. Of course, nowhere is this more powerfully seen in the Babylonian exile than in the example of Daniel. In fact, Daniel does the very dangerous thing that we see later in Jesus. He remains resolutely faithful to Yahweh and the Jewish law and yet he thrives in a foreign, ungodly society. While he prospers in Babylon he doesn't grow too cosy with his host empire, asserting that its values are incongruous with God's governance. Other equally dangerous, biblical examples include Joseph's role in Egypt and Esther's reign as the wife of a Persian king. All three characters flourish in pagan lands and all three are used by God to bring glory to his name. Of course it should be noted that the Book of Daniel, from which we derive nearly all our information about him, wasn't written during the Babylonian captivity, nor was it read by the Babylonian exiles. It was compiled much later and probably written to Jews dealing with similar issues of confinement by an oppressive regime. Nonetheless, the example of Daniel is designed to show how faithful followers of Yahweh respond in a pagan host empire.

In Daniel's case, we know little of his early career other than that he was an Israelite of royal or noble birth and that he was carried into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar's army. Once in exile, he trained for the king's service and, following a custom of the time, was given the Babylonian name, Belteshazzar. We know him for his sagacity and his great skill as an interpreter of dreams, which, eventually led to him occupying several leading governmental posts under kings Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius.

But one of the episodes for which Daniel is known by virtually every Sunday School scholar in history centres around his role as a critic of Belshazzar's court. In the fifth chapter of the book that bears his name, Daniel is ushered into the king's presence to interpret the bizarre vision of a disembodied hand that writes an unintelligible message on the wall. The language has stumped all of the king's seers and diviners, so Daniel is offered inducements to solve the riddle. Showing great pluck, Daniel doesn't resist in using the opportunity to rebuke Belshazzar roundly for his sacrilege and lasciviousness before declaring the supernatural message to be Yahweh's judgement on his reign. That very night Belshazzar is assassinated. The episode demonstrates that even though exiles may thrive in a pagan court, they are to never capitulate to the values of that court. Ironically Daniel is rewarded by the king for interpreting the very vision that spells the end of his life. The idea of being rewarded for critiquing a host empire seems remarkable, even unbelievable. But it fosters a hope that the godly will be blessed for taking the risk of speaking up for God's values in the face of great opposition.

That opposition is realised in Daniel 6 where Belshazzar's successor, Darius, is duped by jealous forces within the government to execute him for his refusal to cease praying to Yahweh. It's also a well-known story, and again demonstrates the power in the exile who refuses to bow to the prevailing culture. Daniel is kept safe in the lion's den and then the Babylonian king, who was loathed to throw him in there in the first place, erupts spontaneously in a hymn of praise:

I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the people of Daniel.  
For he is the living God  
and he endures forever;  
his kingdom will not be destroyed,  
his dominion will never end.  
He rescues and saves;  
he performs signs and wonders  
in the heavens and on earth.  
He has rescued Daniel  
from the power of the lions.

What are we to make of this? A pagan king giving praise to the God of Israel! Like the rabbit stories of El-ahrairah they are daydreams of the vindication of the powerless. Exiles, like the *Watership Down* rabbits, have a thousand enemies in the highest places. In Daniel 6 we see a day when the exile will speak critically into the centre of ungodly power and triumph no matter the cunning of their fox-like enemies. Walter Brueggemann sees this dangerous criticism taking two broad forms. Firstly exiles must offer a *religious* critique of the empire:

Every concentration of power needs its gods to bless it, to give credibility and legitimacy, to evoke loyalty and confidence. Every empire has such legitimating gods, however hidden they may be. But (says the exile) these gods are in fact a joke, because they have no power and they cannot save.<sup>13</sup>

In a post-Christendom world those gods take various forms. Perhaps there is no more powerful 'religion' today than materialism. Like a pagan Babylonian religion it demands all our attention, insisting on everything we have to offer, until in the end all our efforts are bent into its service. Other such gods might be capitalism, celebrity, new religious movements, physical fitness or hedonistic pleasure. Today, we need tenacious followers of Jesus who are prepared to make fun of the powerlessness of these gods and their inability to save or to heal. This will take not only our words but also our actions, our radical lifestyles.

And secondly says Brueggemann, we must be prepared to voice a *political* critique against entrenched power. Once again, Daniel is a good example. He often announces the impending collapse of the empire, anticipating its shame and humiliation. His risky

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<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann 1997, p. 121

message to Belshazzar is that his empire had received all its greatness from Yahweh but had violated Yahweh's mandate by showing no mercy and no honour. By imagining itself to be autonomous Babylon ensures its destruction.

Something similar occurs in John's gospel when Pontius Pilate, looking for a face-saving way to release his prisoner, Jesus, offers him, beaten and humiliated, to the crowd. Their hunger to see Jesus crucified shocks even Pilate. Later when he addresses his prisoner in private Jesus refuses to answer him. Frustrated by his lack of cooperation or his refusal to beg for mercy, the governor boasts, "Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Unperturbed, Jesus replies through split lips and broken teeth, with a dangerous criticism: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." (Jn. 19:10-11) By imagining himself to be autonomous Pilate demonstrates his own folly and Jesus calls him on it. Like Jesus, exiles must avoid such phoney and seductive autonomy. All human life is at the mercy of God and is expected to yield to his Lordship and carry out his purposes of justice, mercy and love. The host empire, including ours today, cannot keep its puny promises of life and we, the people of God, must be prepared to say so. In a powerfully worded poem, Danish pastor Kasch Monk puts it this way:

What is, therefore, the task of the preacher (or the church) today?  
Shall I answer: "Faith, hope and love"?  
That sounds beautiful.  
But I would say – Courage.  
No, even that is not challenging enough to be the whole truth.  
Our task today is recklessness.  
For what we Christians lack is not psychology or literature,  
we lack a holy rage.  
The recklessness that comes from the knowledge of God and humanity.  
The ability to rage when justice lies prostrate on the streets...  
and when the lie rages across the face of the earth –  
a holy anger about things that are wrong in the world.  
To rage against the ravaging of God's earth,  
and the destruction of God's world.  
To rage when little children must die of hunger,  
when the tables of the rich are sagging with food.  
To rage at the senseless killing of so many,  
and against the madness of militaries.  
To rage at the lie that calls the threat of death and the strategy of destruction –  
Peace.  
To rage against complacency.  
To restlessly seek that recklessness that will challenge and seek to change  
human history until it conforms with the norms of the Kingdom of God.  
And remember the signs of the Christian Church have always been –  
the Lion, the Lamb, the Dove, and the Fish...

but never the chameleon. <sup>14</sup>

This is not a call to join some monastery or to escape to some kibbutz. We have to work and shop and live in the empire. Rather it addresses our imagination, shaping and summoning us to another way, the way of Jesus, lived sincerely out in the open in the everyday. But surely today of all times someone must be prepared to cut through the imperial ideology and expose the true character of the empire. In a world where 11 million children die every year of preventable diseases, where 68,000 people die each day of starvation, where Christians from many nations are denied basic human rights, where the US holds international prisoners without charge or trial, where the AIDS epidemic continues across Africa unchecked, where possible HIV infected children are not tested for fear of increasing the damning statistics, who else would speak up but those who serve Christ? "To restlessly seek recklessness" is some vocation.

### **DANGEROUS PROMISES**

What right do we have to critique our host culture if we're not equally as prepared to fashion a viable alternative? For every word of cultural critique offered, the Christian movement must offer dangerous promises in equal measure. The church is meant to be a radical, troubling alternative to the values of the rest of society. In a world of greed and consumerism, the church ought to be a community of generosity and selflessness. In a host empire that is committed to marginalising the poor, resisting the place of women, causing suffering to the disenfranchised, the Christian community must be generous to a fault, pursuant of justice, flushed with mercy.

We are called by God to be his and each other's companions. The term companion is rich in meaning, coming from the Latin, *cum panis* ('with bread'). We are called to deliver on the promise that we will share bread with others, that we will be *one* with each other. There are many names for this sharing: utopia, community, the Kingdom of God. It is this sharing that Jesus calls us to. He does so in the sacramental feast known as the Lord's Supper. He breaks bread and shares it with us. Indeed he *is* the bread, the nourishment that binds us together in our mutual need of him. The Christian movement ought to offer the promise to others that we are the epitome of companionship. We, the church, are God's experimental garden in this world. A story from the country of my birth will express this. When the east coast of the island, later to be called Australia, was first settled by Europeans in 1788 it was discovered that, as beautiful as Sydney Harbour might be, it was no place for food production. Sydney, is in fact built on a seam of sandstone, a clay shelf, that has been great for building a modern city, but terrible for farming. So the new British colony nearly starved to death, stuck on the other side of the planet from their home. To stay alive they were entirely reliant on a steady stream of supply ships, running back and forth from Plymouth to Sydney.

Then in 1791, a freed convict named James Ruse petitioned the governor for a grant of land northwest of the westernmost part of the colony. He was to attempt to hack out of

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<sup>14</sup> Kasch Monk, *International Christian Digest*, Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1996

the virgin scrubland and soil the first viable crop-producing farm. His grand experiment was seen as an indicator of whether the new penal colony could survive without supplies from England. In fact, Ruse called his property Experiment Farm. In a sense the whole colony held its collective breath and awaited the outcome. After a couple of encouraging seasons, eventually Ruse produced a bumper harvest. Experiment Farm was renamed Model Farm for that's what it had become – a model for others to follow. Even today Ruse's original cottage at Model Farm is a national monument, symbolising the hopes of the fledgling nation.

This, then, surely is the mandate of the contemporary church – to be a model farm, an example to others of the hope of the power of the gospel. We are to promise our host empire that the keys to the life abundant rest with us. Christ has delivered them to us. He has fashioned us into a people who belong to God (“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God...” 1Pet.2:9-10) I've heard it said that the best way to critique the old is to fashion the new. What is needed is a community of believers who will fashion a new way of expressing their Christlikeness, a way of grace, mercy, forgiveness and service. Said Lesslie Newbigin, “The only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.” This is our most dangerous promise, that the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst changes us, shapes us, remakes us as a collective of companions who share the bread of Christ with each other and others. It would seem that the poor reputation currently enjoyed by the Religious Right is in part due to the fact that they are quite prepared to criticise public policy, but unable to demonstrate the kind of godly society they demand of others. Rocked by financial and sexual scandals the fundamentalist right is ignored by many in contemporary society precisely because it cannot follow up its critique with the fulfilment of its dangerous promises.

To return to Daniel, if the fifth chapter is a critique of Babylon, then the following chapter is the promise of the exile who refuses to succumb to the rulers of the age. Daniel is cast into the lion's den because he refuses to bow the knee to the king who claims to be all-powerful and worthy of his worship. Daniel won't yield to the lordship of the Babylonian king and seems destined to pay the ultimate sacrifice. His miraculous rescue fills Christians the world over with the promise that God will vindicate those who remain loyal to him. Of course, many persecuted Christians around the planet have been as faithful to God and he has not stopped the lions' mouths. Daniel 6 is not a promise that we will all triumph over our oppressors. Rather, it is a theologically creative statement that the promises we make by remaining faithful to God's plan for us will bear fruit. It is the hope that such faithfulness will eventually break the heart of a battle-weary King Darius and that he too will burst forth with praise. This is a lesson more obviously learnt by the Christians who remained true under Soviet oppression or do so today under the Communist Chinese regime. Not everyone is rescued from the lions, but somehow, under God's great grace, their faithfulness will eventually wring praises from the mouths of their oppressors.

Here in the post-Christendom West there is much talk about justice and peace, but the dangerous example of Daniel or Jesus or our Chinese brothers and sisters reinforces that

such criticism of our host empire must involve our actions and our lifestyles, not just our words. The Czech poet, dissident and prime minister, Vaclav Havel knew more about this than I when he said,

There is such an enormous gap between our words and deeds! Everyone talks about freedom, democracy, justice, human rights, and peace; but at the same time, everyone, more or less, consciously or unconsciously, serves those values and ideals only to the extent necessary to defend and serve his own interests, and those of his group and state. Who should break this vicious circle? Responsibility cannot be preached: it can only be borne, and the only possible place to begin is with oneself.

Indeed, such promises must be enacted not just proclaimed even if that means we might be headed toward the lions' den.

Our current church culture, so wedded to Christendom thinking and now so out of touch with its host empires, avoids danger and stumps for gentleness, sentimentality, respectability. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the songs we sing and the preaching we hear each Sunday. Our music is insipid, cloying and romantic. We sing pop-style love songs to Jesus, confessing our undying love for him in the same way that a pop idol sings to her boyfriend. Where is the danger? Where is the responsibility? So many great revolutions have been birthed through the songs their revolutionaries sang. The French revolutionaries sang in 1789 outside the Bastille. The Bolsheviks sang their radical songs in St Petersburg. The American civil rights movement sang of liberty and righteousness in Alabama. The anti-Marcos revolutionaries sang through the streets of Manila. In South Africa, under apartheid, Christmas carols were banned because they evoked a revolutionary yearning for freedom and peace. That's how powerful the music of revolution can be.

Even more recently, we have seen the use of singing to rouse a new generation of Chinese into action. As the nation undergoes enormous economic and social change, you might be surprised to learn that revolutionary songs still ring out over the capital, Beijing. Every morning for the past five years, in an ancient park called the Temple of Heaven, south of the Forbidden City, hundreds of people gather to sing. Armed with nothing more dangerous than a songbook they sing revolutionary songs, some from before China's liberation, some from the time of the anti-Japanese war, and others written just after the communists came to power. These are the songs of the radical revolutionary past, before the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution, before the suffering and the corruption of modern China. These were the songs that imagined a radical, daring, magnificent future of equality and justice for all, and which, when sung today, hold the Chinese regime accountable, indicting them for their failure to deliver.

In his memoir of his time running a free medical clinic in one of India's largest slums, Gregory Roberts recalls the time he first heard the Blind Singers of Nagpur. Stumbling upon a late-closing nightspot on the outskirts of Bombay, he heard a choir of angelic voices singing in Urdu. He described it this way:

A gradual silence settled in the room, and then all of a sudden three men began to sing in powerful, thrilling voices. It was a luscious sound – a layered gorgeous music of passionate intensity. The men weren't just singing, they were crying and wailing in song. Real tears ran from their closed eyes and dripped onto their chests. I was elated, listening to it; and yet, somehow I felt ashamed. It was as if the singers had taken me into their deepest and most intimate love and sorrow.<sup>15</sup>

Roberts then re-tells their sad story. While performing in a remote village, the travelling singers were caught up in a tribal battle and captured by marauding bandits. Along with twenty members of the village they were captured, tortured and had their eyes put out with bamboo rods. Now they travel around India, singing Urdu worship songs in nightclubs and cafes. Their effect is mesmerising. While listening to their breathtaking performance, Gregory Roberts remembers a local philosopher leaning over and whispering in his ear, "The truth is found more often in music than it is in books of philosophy."

Compare these wild, rebellious songs to the lyrics of contemporary Christian worship songs. Today worshippers sing, doe-eyed and sentimental, about their special love for Jesus (and his for them). Yet, in the past our brothers and sisters sang into reality a marvellous new world, a dangerous set of promises. Another exile, a revolutionary called Isaiah, writing in exilic times composed these words on behalf of God:

For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,  
I will gasp and pant. (Isa.42:14)

So, when the fierce Yahweh sings he does so like a mother in labour. Now, that's my kind of singing! God's songs give birth to a new world, a new way of being his followers. And when we join in on the chorus of these rough, revolutionary songs we share in the promise-making of God. We too declare our commitment to a new way, a way of justice, peace, mercy and generosity. Why can't our corporate singing summon up a world where the poor are fed, and the marginalised are welcomed at the table of the Lord? Why can't we sing about the world that Jesus dreamed up on the side of that mountain? Why does our singing so often seem so trivial? If you've ever seen the powerful and violent New Zealand film, *Once Were Warriors* you will have seen two very different types of singing.

Set in Auckland, the film deals with the Heke family, descended from Maori warriors, but riven apart by violence, alcohol and social dislocation. Beth Heke is a feisty, beautiful mother of five, married for eighteen years to her volatile husband Jake, a muscular, explosive man. Jake spends most of his time at the local pub, getting drunk and proving his masculinity with his fists. Beth too experiences his wrath and in one early and nearly

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram*, Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2003, p.193

unwatchable scene Jake beats her senseless. But Beth is profoundly aware of her warrior heritage and seeks to rise above the urban pointlessness of their existence. Together with her children, Beth seeks steadfastly to recover the moral strength and cultural pride of their forebears. She especially teaches her daughter, Grace, about her culture, its beliefs, its songs. Drawing on her own Maori roots and personal strength she courageously turns adversity into triumph and creates new hope for her own and her family's survival. One of the ways she does this is through singing.

In two juxtaposed scenes Beth, Grace and other women in their family join together in singing ancient songs of strength and communal power. Their singing is a protest against the violence, alcoholism and futility of their existence. They sing up a new world, drawing on the anchors of the past. Shortly after, Jake takes Beth and Grace on a road trip. Listening to the car radio Jake hears a meaningless novelty pop song. He cranks up the volume and insists they all sing along. Compared to the ancient Maori song this silly tune is meaningless and trivial. Jake and his friends are used to getting drunk and singing along to a jukebox. His songs count for nothing. They mean nothing. They summon no change. They challenge no action. They are diversions from reality, not responses to that reality.

Like God singing in travail in Isaiah 42, the Maori songs are pregnant with meaning and resounding with hope for Beth and her friends. Surely Christian worship ought to do the same and I'm not necessarily advocating that we return to the rousing old hymns of Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley. Rather, I want to hear a new song, a revolutionary Christ-song that summons from me greater faith in the new world God is forming within us. Likewise, I want to hear a spoken word in the assembly that expresses danger, energy, possibility, an opening for newness. So much preaching is so overly concerned with the technical questions of getting the truth *right* that preachers have squeezed all the life out of the gospel. We have thought of the gospel as a fragile and precious object and have held it too tightly and it has become shapeless and uninteresting. Much of what passes for gospel speech these days is not dramatic or artistic. It is bound by the reason of technique and overly concerned with concreteness. It seems stilted and mechanical. We believers hear it presented to us week in, week out, and by virtue of the very fact that we *are* believers we put up with it. It is a truth greatly reduced and it calls forth from us a faith greatly reduced also. Our struggle in the twenty first century will be the struggle to maintain our commitment to the teachings of Jesus and the revelation of the gospel in the New Testament while endeavouring to rediscover a robust poetic faith that abandons certitude and inanity.

### **GENEROUSLY ANGRY**

In England in 1922, young Eric Blair, with no idea what else to do with his life, followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Indian Imperial Police, serving as a subdivisional officer in Burma. By all accounts he hated every minute of it and finally resigned and returned to England five years later at the age of 24. Listless, unambitious, dishevelled and possibly depressed he returned to a bedroom in his family's home. He lived there in obscurity for a year before emerging in 1928, declaring that he intended to become a

writer and heading off to Paris. Today we know him as George Orwell. His emergence in 1928 was as dramatic as the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The maudlin young Eric Blair disappeared into his bedroom one day, only to materialise a year later as the tenacious, prophetic writer, Orwell. This is the same Orwell who wrote of the injustices of street life in Paris and London, who fought in the Spanish Civil War and who picked fun at the horrors of Stalinism. Well might we ask what happened in that bedroom that year in 1927. By Orwell's own account he simply took to his bed with as many books by Charles Dickens he could find. He was transformed by reading Dickens! *The Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectation*. Immersed in these stories, Orwell developed the passionate zeal of a crusader for the poor and disenfranchised. These stories changed him and changed the course of his life. Writing much later he said,

Reading Dickens I see the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is generously angry. <sup>16</sup>

Dickens' stories became Orwell's dangerous memories. They brought him out in the open, campaigning for a greater cause. Orwell's own books, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, were uncompromisingly dangerous critiques of the world around him, but contained within their pages were the marvellous promises of a better world. If reading Dickens can do that for a man, what can reading Jesus do? I love Orwell's description of Dickens as one who is angry and fighting against this world, but who does so generously, out in the open, not lurking in the shadows. This is the honourable fight of the exile, to be generously, expansively, tenaciously angry.

Exiles are inspired by visions, ideas and inspirations that spring pristine from the primary spring of truth and life: from Christ himself. They have a word to say, not stained by this present, disintegrating society, but from the unquenched source of hope through which society might be reborn. Joseph Campbell spoke of people like this – he called them 'heroes' – when he wrote:

The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man - perfected, unspecific, universal man - he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore... is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lessons he has learned of life renewed. <sup>17</sup>

Campbell was not speaking in Christian terms, but he was on to something when he dared to hope for people who could taste of life as it was meant to be and speak into this fractured world about how to find it. As a Christian those lessons are found on the lips of Jesus, our dangerous memory. Furthermore, Campbell says,

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<sup>16</sup> FIND SOURCE – biography of Orwell

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (commemorative edition), Bollingen, 2004, p.24

...we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path.<sup>18</sup>

For followers of Jesus, it is he who has gone before us. He has trod the true hero-path. Campbell continues:

The passage of the ...hero ...is inward – into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world. ... (Now) it appears that the perilous journey was a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery.<sup>19</sup>

This is the work of the exile. Not the discovery of a new gospel, or a new christ, or a new bible, as some more liberal thinkers have suggested, but the rediscovery of the original genius of the teaching of Jesus and the missional practice of the earliest Christians.

So this book is written to those who feel like exiles in a post-Christendom era. If you're like me you have no stomach for calling the church back to the old ways that were developed during Christendom. We're out of our Sandleford burrow and heading across uncharted territory. How will we practice our critical distance from our context? How will we express our radical promises to this world? As mentioned earlier, we must begin by casting ourselves back to our most wonderful, but dangerous memories. We must begin with the example of Jesus himself. Before we begin strategising or scheming 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians must reposition ourselves chiefly, first and foremost, as people of the way of Christ. And it's to his example that we must turn next.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid