

Becoming a people of hope

'If you are looking for exiles in Britain today, I would suggest you don't need to look to those who have come to this country from overseas. It is a sad fact that many people here are growing up as strangers to their own heritage of Christian faith surrounded by the signs and symbols of that faith in the church buildings and in the constitution of our land, yet unable to see for themselves the fantastic potential for good that it represents.'

Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York and ReSource's Patron, writes from personal experience about what it means to be an exile in a foreign land. The Church of England is herself in a place of exile, he says. Nevertheless we are called to live faithfully where God has placed us and to make a difference

Since my exile from Amin's Uganda in 1974 my family and I have made this country our home. Arriving in Cambridge that year, and being made welcome at Selwyn College where I took the Theology Tripos, my life in 'exile' has been a fortunate one. And yet the theme of 'living in exile' never quite goes away. I have, from time to time, been at the sharp end of being a stranger in a foreign land. When I was Bishop for Stepney I was stopped and searched once by the police when simply driving home from Guildford. This had happened seven times when, before that, I was Vicar of Tulse Hill in South London. There is a particular vulnerability about being identifiably alien. And yet as Christians all of us are living as strangers in a foreign land. Our citizenship, Paul reminds us, is in heaven.

My deep longing for the Gospel to make more and more of a difference to people ---

If you were to ask me, where my home was, it would be difficult to give an answer. Do you mean where have I been so far, or where am I heading? I don't think I am alone

in this. We all pray every day, 'Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as in heaven'. For me this expresses my deep longing for the Gospel to make more and more of a difference to people and to the society we live in, so we can see God's just and gentle rule established in the everyday life of our world.

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Not that I can agree with all that is said on the theme of exile about the society we live in. Kenneth Leech, the well known East End priest and theologian, wrote this:

'As Christians enter the 21st century, they do so as exiles, strangers and pilgrims, aliens in a strange land. They will need to learn strategies of survival, and to sing the songs of Zion in the midst of Babylon. The era of Christendom is over, and we need to develop post Christendom theologies of liberation.'

If by this is implied an easy capitulation to a secular basis for our society, then there is much here



ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU IN A TENT IN 2012 the Archbishop of York gave up a family holiday in Austria to live and fast in a tent in York Minster for a week as part of an act of public witness to encourage peace in the Middle East. Afterwards the Archbishop said: This act is a rallying call to people of all faiths and none, to encourage them to feel that there is something that can be done

I want to question. I do not believe that all is lost as far as the Christian roots of our society are concerned. Nor do I accept, as is argued by some, that our society is in some way 'broken', as if all we needed was a new Mr Fixit.

I do agree however that there is a lot to learn from a theology of exile, for that is where, I believe, the Church of England currently finds itself. We are tempted, as the exiles were, to look back, to be nostalgic, and defeatist. Just like the descendants of Abraham in Babylon however, we have to live faithfully in the place and time in which we find ourselves, and let God surprise us here with His liberating power. Just as ancient Israel learned, from its ignominious defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, to trust in God and to hope for the future, so in our time the Church must rediscover its identity as the prophetic people of God, called to present the reality of the Kingdom of God to all creation. It is high time we regained confidence in the Good News that is ours in Jesus Christ, and set out to make the difference that springs from this, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When I was growing up in Kampala there was a Negro Spiritual song we used to hear on the radio. It was Jim Reeves singing 'This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through'. This was small comfort to those of us who were hoping for political change, and longing for an end to the injustices and the brutality we saw on a daily basis in Amin's Uganda.

Here is the Church seeking the welfare of the city', following Christ the Servant, washing the feet of the poor, lifting high the lowly, and demonstrating the Father's love

Whilst it is true that 'Our citizenship is in heaven' and that our true home is where God's will is perfectly done, as exiles in a foreign land, we are nevertheless committed to living here to make a difference for good in our time. Jeremiah spoke in no uncertain terms about the responsibilities of the Israelites living in Babylon:

'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf,

for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' Jeremiah 29: 7

I find it amazing and wonderful, as I visit churches and communities up and down the country, when I see that people are waking up to this huge priority that is given to us today – to make Christ known, in word and deed. Though some churches may still be in defeatist mode, in cities, towns, and villages all over the country every day other parishes are throwing their doors open to a very wide range of activities making all the difference to those involved. They are running a very wide range of projects: helping unemployed people find jobs, offering alternative education classes to teenagers excluded from school, supporting parents and children caught up in destructive relationships, helping people out of addiction and crime – there are few areas of social need untouched by the churches' practical commitment and sheer hard work. Here is the Church 'seeking the welfare of the city', following Christ the Servant, washing the feet of the poor, lifting high the lowly, and demonstrating the Father's love.

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The Government does not always recognise just how much the churches are doing to make a difference. You have to ask, if we weren't there, who would be doing this? We are saving the taxpayer a lot of money. But that is not the point. Our doors are open because as Christians our hearts are open to the whole community, and to everyone there. Having received God's unconditional love, that is what is at work in us.

Where this is happening, more often than not this activity flows from a community life which is sustained by worshipping together, praying together, and by sharing a sense of privileged responsibility.

In exile it was written, in *Isaiah 52*, of the day when the good news would be proclaimed in the city of Jerusalem once more, when there would be shouts of joy and songs of gladness, when comfort, peace, and salvation would return to God's people. I long to see the Church recover its confidence in proclaiming the good news of God in Christ. How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns'. *Isaiah 2*

If you are looking for exiles in Britain today, I would suggest you don't need to look to those who have come to this country from overseas. It is a sad fact that many people here are growing up as strangers to their own heritage of Christian faith, surrounded by the signs and symbols of that faith in the church buildings and in the constitution of our land,

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yet unable to see for themselves the fantastic potential for good that it represents.

In the 1970s when I arrived here some of the students in Cambridge were so scruffy – it was the age of old jeans and jumpers with holes in the arms. Often these same students had very smart suits and jackets in their wardrobes, which never saw the light of day. Today in this country it is fashionable to wear the clothes of scepticism and cynicism. This is a shame, and quite unnecessary. In my experience it doesn't take so

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much for people to realise that we can do better than this, that we can become a people of hope, a people with a high calling, ready to take on the challenges of our day with confidence and with faith. We need to trust God more, and be confident in what He has given us in the Gospel.

The Easter message of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life is set against a backdrop of escape from exile. Jesus is the true Paschal lamb, recalling the liberation from slavery and exile in Egypt, and He comes to us offering his life, inviting us to share in His relationship both with the Father and with the world for which He laid down his life. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us, filled with His Spirit, both to be and to proclaim the good news. The fresh springtime of the Spirit sees individuals and communities coming to life in wonderful new ways.

I hope we are entering a new springtime of the Spirit in the Church and Nation of England. Whether in traditional or in fresh expressions of church we must learn to be open

to the Spirit's anointing. This is not simply to bless the schemes we have devised, but rather to raise up prophets and evangelists and teachers for our time. Amongst a people who have largely forgotten who they are and where they have come from, we need those who will release the captives, open the eyes of the blind, and bring this very good news to the poor.

With this in mind I hope, in the coming months, to be drawing together some of those who share a vision for reconnecting our country with the Christian faith. Let us see what we can learn from one another, and let us see what God will do.

May God renew us all in faith, hope, and love this Easter, and may we know the joy of the risen Lord as we share the good news with our fellow exiles in this land. And may we all be pilgrims together on the way with Christ walking with us and warming our hearts as we listen to Him. 

+Sentamu Ebor



about the writer

The Most Revd John Sentamu was born in Uganda in 1949. Encouraged in his education by English missionaries, he graduated in law from Makerere University, Kampala and practised law before he came to the UK in 1974.

Dr Sentamu read theology at Selwyn College Cambridge and trained for ordination at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. After serving in parishes in London, he was appointed Bishop of Stepney in 1996, Bishop of Birmingham in 2002 and Archbishop of York in 2005. He has been Patron of ReSource since 2007.

His interests include music, cooking, reading, athletics, rugby and football. He is married to Margaret, and they have two grown-up children, and two grown-up foster children.