

Based on the Livability Bible Studies ‘Together for Good’ which aim to increase well-being for individuals and communities. This is the final reflection in the 5-part series.

Finding Meaning

People generally find it fairly easy to think and talk about what makes them happy, but ask them what gives their life meaning and they usually have trouble coming up with ideas. Can the Bible help us uncover those hidden depths of meaning?

Bible Study: Jeremiah 29:1-14 Finding hope in times of crisis and sorrow

Jeremiah was written during a time of crisis for Israel when the people were living in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed and the land left in ruins for 70 years. Jeremiah sent a message of hope and promise of future recovery into this situation. **But if you were one of those exiles, how would you have felt, would you have been able to summon up much hope?**

When I read this, especially v5-7 I thought of the Palestinian people under siege in Gaza (“We have an incredibly hard situation these days – not just for Christians for all Gazans. It’s like a prison here” - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-christmas-palestine-israel-jerusalem-bethlehem-church-middle-east-war-religion-a8690106.html>) – how long must they suffer? And the Coptic Christians, (listen to testimony about Coptic Christians who have been killed on the Radio 4 Sunday Worship programme from 7 April: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00040gz>)



- How could all this apply to our situation today? Is there anything for us to learn? (not specifically at St John’s but in the wider Christian world)
- How do we respond as Christians to grief, disappointment and misfortune?

Welfare or Peace

One of the key words in the passage is translated into English as “welfare” (v 7 and v 11). It is the word *shalom*, which is usually understood to mean “peace”. However, shalom has a much deeper and richer meaning than the absence of external conflict, or the presence of inner tranquillity. It is best rendered “wholeness” or “completeness”, a situation in which all dimensions of life are as they should be, whether in personal health and wellbeing, interpersonal harmony or even national or international accord (at heart it is a relational word). To speak of shalom is to encompass every dimension of human life, and God wants to bring about our shalom – even in the most calamitous situations (as in Jeremiah 29).

Questions:

Verse 7 reads, “Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.”

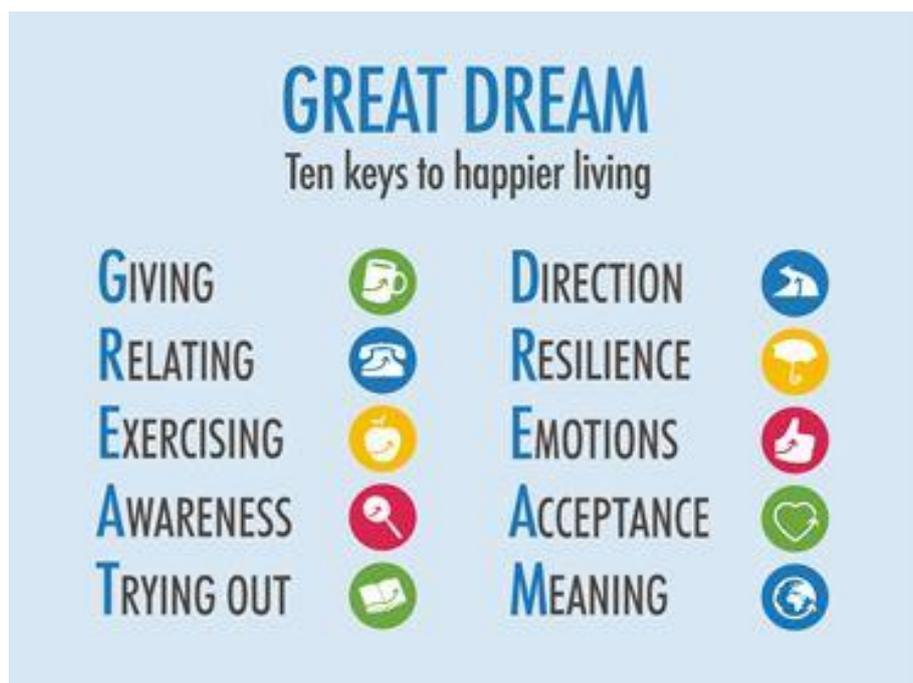
- If God was telling his people to “build houses, take wives and multiply there”, what does that tell us about God’s intention for God’s people in contexts where they do not feel at home or at ease?
- What does all this mean for us today? How do we “seek the welfare” of the place “where God has sent us”? How do we “find our welfare” in the welfare of our surrounding community, and our nation?

Summing up the 5 week series

Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner says, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

- Where/what is that place for you?
- What would you say your greatest joy - your deep gladness is? How might its encounter with the world’s need (i.e. that of the people around you) become your vocation?
- If someone were to ask you what the meaning of your life is, what would you say?

- How might you apply Buechner’s words to our church community?
- What would you say its greatest joy is, and how might this translate into its main vocation?
- What difference would it make to the local community if St John’s suddenly disappeared overnight?



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