Living Fully in Exile (Quarantine)
by Brenden Bell

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, the first weekend in May, and the seventh Sunday without public masses. Let that sink in for a moment. We are now solidly in the second month of this quarantine, which has lasted longer than most of us thought it would. Or at least, that is what we wanted to believe. If you are like me the reality of our situation really sank in with Easter, when I could not go to any of the Triduum masses. The live streams were great, but it was not the same. While there are hopes of some return on the horizon, we know it is going to take a while and we don’t really know when this is all going to end.

When I think about our current situation, being physically separated from friends, family, the world, and especially the church and the sacraments, I think about the Babylonian Exile, when the Israelites were taken from their homeland and forced to live in Babylon. They were cut off from their home, their way of life, but most of all from the Temple their place of worship. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles, which I think is very relevant for us today.

In the letter, God tells the exiles, “Build houses to dwell in; plant gardens, and eat their fruits. Take wives and beget sons and daughters… There you must increase in number, not decrease.” (Jer 29: 5-6). God is telling the exiles two things. One, they are in it for the long haul, and therefore have to get use to the new normal. Two, they need to live life and live it fully. They can’t let the sorrow of what was lost prevent them from receiving God’s gifts given today. I think the same thing is true for us. Even if things begin to open up tomorrow, it will be a slow process back and things will never be exactly the same. We are in it for the long haul and need to accept the new normal. But that is not a reason to stop living, but all the more reason to live fully. We need to increase in joy and life, not decrease.

And we have reason to rejoice. The letter goes on to explain God’s plan to restore the Israelites and bring them back to their homeland. “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you... I will gather you together from all the nations and all the places to which I have banished you, says the LORD, and bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.” (Jer 29:11-12,14). God promises to the Israelites an end to their exile, and he promises an end to our exile. This situation is temporary, and we will get through this by faith. While we live fully in the moment facing the challenges and trials that come to us, we can have hope in the future. As Saint Paul says, “We know that all things work for the good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Rom 8:28). God has a plan for our welfare. He has made a promise, and he does not break his promises.

There is one more lesson we can take from this quarantine this time of exile. It is the realization that in this world we are always in exile. Even if tomorrow God miraculously made the Covid 19 virus disappear, there would still be other diseases, violence, and suffering of all kinds. This world we live in can be very beautiful, but it is also broken. It is a nice place to visit, but it is not our true homeland. Last Sunday, we heard Saint Peter tell us, “conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your sojourning” (1 Peter 1:17). This can be a message to us in quarantine, but it is also a message for our whole life. We are exiles looking for our true homeland. We are pilgrims passing through this world into the promised land. We live in the present world and live fully doing all the ordinary day to day things, but our eyes, like the eyes of our Master, are set toward the heavenly Jerusalem.