

## **An Impetus of New Life and Dispossession**

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In 587 BC, the people of the Covenant lived through tragic events. After a siege of more than a year, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and his army succeeded in penetrating Jerusalem. They pillaged and destroyed the temple of Jerusalem and set fire to part of the holy city.

The population was subjected to all sorts of violence: many men were killed, women were raped, and children were slaughtered. King Zedekiah, a descendant of David, was captured and, after his sons' throats were slit in front of him, his eyes were gouged out. Finally, in order to prevent any possibility of the nation's resurgence, a significant part of the population—particularly its political leaders and religious elites—was deported to Babylon.

### **The Experience of Dispossession**

From a human perspective, this catastrophe seemed to sound the death knell of the people of the Covenant. Indeed, they had just lost what they believed to be the constituent elements of their identity: the land, the Davidic king and the temple.

Was not Canaan the Promised Land, the sign of God's blessing? Did not the king represent YHWH among his people? Was not the temple the dwelling place of God on earth, the ideal place for meeting and celebrating Him? In short, the small remnant of the deportees is dispossessed of the institutions that had served them as pillars for approximately the last five centuries. To a certain extent, they even feel deprived of their God.

At that time, YHWH was seen as a national God with jurisdiction over a given territory, outside of which he could not act. That is the theology reflected in Psalm 137 (136): "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept. . . . How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (vv. 1, 4)

At first, the exiles do not see any possible future. Completely discouraged, they are no longer able to hope for better days. They say to themselves, "Our bones are dry, our hope is gone, we are done for." (Ez 37:11)

We can understand that the people are going through the worst crisis in their history. For many of them, it is clear that this is the end. They see themselves as a people doomed to extinction. Echoing what he hears around him, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the dead closed up in their graves (Ez 37:12-13). Certainly, the sons of Israel are in a situation of great vulnerability. They are experiencing fragility and they are reaching the end of their tether.

### **Parallels with Current Religious Life**

This is not completely without parallel to what is happening in religious life in Canada. Our congregations and our communities are also increasingly reduced to their simplest form. This movement of stripping away, of dispossession, is not yet over. Because of our

reduction in members, many of our institutions can no longer function as before. Identity landmarks on which we had been accustomed to supporting ourselves are shaken.

Religious life has also entered a crisis phase. Many institutes are on the road to disappearance. Some of our members are suffering in their hopes and wondering if religious life is not in its death throes. Whatever the case, we must recognize that our congregations have not experienced such fragility for a long time.

It is instructive to look into what happened to the deportees in Babylonia. Surprisingly, the people of the Covenant did not disappear. The dispossession and the crisis experienced led them to look at their history and to revisit their oldest traditions. They went back to their sources. This allowed them to discover that what they had lost was not the hard core of their identity. Thus, they discovered that they were still in possession of the essential.

### **The Lessons of History**

On the basis of this awareness, the people of Israel went boldly off the beaten track. Supported by the preaching of prophets like Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40–55), with the help of priests and Deuteronomists (a group of secular intellectuals), the deportees were able to demonstrate great creativity rather than clinging desperately to a past.

They provided themselves with new ways to celebrate their faith and remain faithful to the God of the Covenant. For example, the practice of a weekly Sabbath, a ritual celebrated without the need of a temple, began in this epoch. It was also during this period that Judaism began to focus more on listening to the Word than on offering sacrifices.

We note that the experience of dispossession and fragility was the source of a great spurt of new life. Could it not be said that the tragedy of deportation became a time of grace? In fact, it contributed to a tremendous revival of Israel's theology and worship practices. Not to mention that the people of the Covenant did not disappear as had been feared. They are still quite alive 2500 years later!

Does not the experience of our ancestors in faith give us reason to hope that a new impetus of life could emerge from our present-day dispossession and fragility? Are we not seeing the appearance of signs, especially through the current upsurge of a considerable number of affiliates/associates in our communities, but also through an unprecedented collaboration among our Institutes? It is a safe bet that our God of life has other surprises in store for us. Keep your eyes open and let us remain available to his movements!

### **Continuing the Reflection:**

- Under what conditions could our fragilities become an impetus of new life?
- Has our community ever experienced that a downturn of fortunes or a fragility has given rise to new life? If so, go back and meditate on this experience.