

Planting with the prophet Jeremiah

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11

Ten years ago, the scientist Glenn Albrecht coined a new word. He was studying the impact of open-cut coal mining on the people of the Upper Hunter region of NSW. The mines were creating new and horrific scars in the landscape; the power station was polluting water, air and soil; there was persistent drought. As the earth groaned, Albrecht realised that the people who lived there were experiencing a form of chronic distress for which English has no word; he came up with the term ‘solastalgia.’

Solastalgia. It combines the longing of nostalgia, which is the longing for home, with the need for solace in the face of desolation. It’s a form of homesickness, but it’s experienced by people who have never left home. Instead, they are seeing their home changing for the worse around them.

Solastalgia is a new word, but it’s certainly not a new experience. It’s known by every Indigenous person whose land has been stolen, compacted, cleared, and irrevocably damaged before their eyes; and it’s known by every Torres Strait Islander fighting for the future of their now frequently flooding home.

It’s known by people whose land is being destroyed by industry, mining or endless suburban sprawl. It’s known by those who grieve formerly soft grey eucalyptus hillsides, now scarred by unprecedented bushfires, clearcuts or dark green imported pine. Solastalgia is the desolation we feel at the vast monocrops of agribusiness, where trees have been entirely eradicated and once fertile soil is now little more than chemically boosted dust. It’s the sense of loss we feel at the collapse of butterfly populations, or the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef.

Solastalgia. It’s the feeling of desolation when our home deteriorates around us, it’s the leading cause of anxiety and depression in our children and grandchildren, and this feeling is only going to get worse. Because as the climate changes and we experience less stable weather patterns and more extreme weather events, solastalgia will begin to affect everyone. Once unprecedented floods and fires will become even more common. Seasons are already arriving too early, extending too long, sowing times are already shifting and what we grow is already needing to be changed as the weather warms up and the rains don’t come, or come too hard too late.

But why am I talking about solastalgia?

First, because I keep having conversations with people who feel it acutely. They are attuned to the world around them, they can see what’s happening, and they long for local and global healing. Yet they also see fossil fuel projects being approved willy-nilly, unabated mining and endless suburban sprawl. As the powers fiddle

while everywhere burns, these people are filled with hopelessness and dread. Solastalgia is a pressing pastoral, theological and spiritual issue.

Second, because Jeremiah has an ecological sensibility. In his wider proclamation, he repeatedly links injustice to land degradation and species loss, and idolatry to drought. Without right relationship between people and God, each other, and the land, a rightness we call 'shalom', chaos will ensue and creation will be undone.

Bringing this to bear on today's reading, I notice that Jeremiah 29 is addressed to a people living in exile. They have been forcibly removed from the land of their ancestors to an unfamiliar place. There is much we could say here about our own family histories and where our ancestors come from, or about the hospitality we might show refugees. But today I will focus on solastalgia, because solastalgia is also a form of exile. It's exile from the land, even if the land is still right there beneath our feet, and it's caused by the economics of empire.

This is the economy where workers never have a day off and the shops never shut; it's the economy which never sleeps. It's the economy of endless extraction and agribusiness and farming practices imported from half a world away. It's the economy of globalisation. This economy fells forests and digs mines and expands animal husbandry way beyond sustainable limits. It's the economy of Babylon, an empire which seizes land, people and resources and uses them to generate more wealth for the elite; and it's our economy, too. And so, I suggest, the letter in Jeremiah 29 has something to say to us.

The first recipients no doubt felt desolate. They were longing for a home that they would never see again; they had little hope for the future. But through this letter from Jeremiah, God encourages them, and God tells them to do two things.

First, they are to get on with life right where they are. 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce,' writes Jeremiah. 'Get married and have children; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear children; multiply there, and do not decrease.' (Jeremiah 29:5-6) In other words, make a home, create a life, plant a backyard veggie patch. Put down roots, and don't be afraid to have kids. However grim things might feel, take delight in homemaking and children: because this is your home now, and you're going to be here for a long, long time, the rest of your life in fact.

To a people living with solastalgia, that is, living in the exile caused by industrial activity and climate change, this is provocative. I know people who feel so bleak about the future, they have decided not to have children; I know people who are too despondent to recycle or plant veggies or do even the smallest thing towards sustainability because it's all too little too late and what's the point, anyway? But this text suggests that wherever we are, whatever is happening, we should still engage in the good life of home and garden, family and children, neighbourhood and community.

This brings me to the second task, which is this: '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).

If we consider the original context, this is a real stomach-turner. God's people have been invaded, captured, and dragged into exile by those vicious Babylonian dogs. They have seen their homes and fields destroyed, and people they love assaulted and killed; they themselves may have suffered extreme violence. But the prophet tells them to seek the welfare of the city where they are in exile and to pray on its behalf, because their welfare is bound up in the welfare of the wider city. Does the prophet, or God, really expect them to seek the benefit of the Babylonians? And if so, what does this mean?

Well, it's possible to hear this as an instruction to settle down and obey. To make nice and blend in; to assimilate and do all the things the neighbours do. It's possible to hear this as an order to participate uncritically in the 24/7 economy, working and shopping and building up the city's wealth while waving the banner of economic growth. If the city gets richer, everyone will benefit: at least, that's the theory of empire, and it's one way of interpreting this instruction.

But let's take a step back. The word translated as 'welfare' is 'shalom', that is, right relationship between people, community, land and God. This is where it gets interesting, especially for those of us living with solastalgia.

Because I suggest that business as usual does not actually lead to right relationship between people, community, land and God. It may generate wealth and welfare for some: but most economic growth is flowing upwards, even as it costs everyone healthy land, healthy waterways, and a healthy stable climate. This was as true for Babylon then as it is for us now; for ancient records show that the economics of empire has always led to the crushing of the poor, and to deforestation, land degradation and species loss.

Business as usual, in fact, might be the teaching of false preachers who equate capitalism with godliness, economic prosperity with blessing, and (at the kookier end) the burning up of the earth with the return of Jesus: but to paraphrase Jeremiah, don't listen to them, don't let them deceive you: 'for it is a lie that they are preaching to you in my name ...' (Jeremiah 29:8-9).

Indeed, business as usual comes with an enormous price tag: international and generational injustice, and ecological collapse. In other words, business as usual damages relationship between people and each other, and the land, and God; and this damage is what we call sin. It harms the earth which God calls good; it creates solastalgia; and it threatens our very future.

How, then, do we seek the shalom, the peace, the welfare of the home where we live in exile, whether that home is the City of Manningham or the whole of Planet Earth?

However we frame it, it seems to me that it must mean mitigating climate change and restoring the land. So seeking shalom will mean rehabilitating the earth, and

this work is very practical. It might mean gardening sustainably, participating in community planting days, or planting a tree whose shade we will never sit under. It might mean contributing to Indigenous-led projects of restoring and caring for Country. It might mean thinking about how we shop, cook and eat, or lobbying for clean rivers. It might mean cheering on young people engaged in climate action; it might mean getting involved ourselves. And it might mean making financial choices.

Like most groups of this size in the eastern suburbs, between us we hold enormous wealth. Between us, we'd have at least fifty to a hundred million dollars in superannuation and investments. Where is this money invested? Which banks, which funds, which industries are holding our money, and what are they investing in? Are we bankrolling fossil fuel projects and climate catastrophe, or are we bankrolling sustainable projects which are good for our grandchildren's grandchildren? Imagine the leverage our combined super and investments could have if they were all put to life-giving purposes!

Whatever we do in our work of shalom, the words of the prophet are clear. There is no quick return. We're going to be in the place of exile for a long, long time, the rest of our lives, in fact. And while the work of shalom will not return us to Eden or even to a pre-industrial climate, each little thing will help. Damien Carrington describes us as being in a race between Armageddon and awesome. He points out that we already have everything we need to turn our world into a series of clean, green economies with enormous benefits to the health and wellbeing of all people, especially the poor; green economies will mean a great flourishing of the land. We can seek shalom and counter solastalgia by choosing awesome: by joining with others to restore and rehabilitate cities and landscapes, by caring for God's good earth, and by directing our money to this purpose, also. And this, I believe, is the path we are called to. And why?

'Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.' (Jeremiah 29:11). So let's not give ourselves over to Armageddon and despair, or consign our descendants to endless solastalgia. Instead, let's continue to work and pray for our grandchildren, their grandchildren, and God's hope-filled future, promised by the one who calls life out of death, rivers out of deserts, and thriving gardens out of wastelands; the one who works in even the most desolate of circumstances to redeem death and devastation; the one who meets us in our grief in the garden; the one who continues to beckon us into full and flourishing life not only for our own benefit, but for everyone and everything around us. May we trust in God's promises. Amen. Ω

- Do you recognise the feeling of solastalgia?
- In which landscape is it most acute?
- How have you worked towards the land's healing?