

Baruch 5

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem Baruch 5:1

It is the first line, of our first reading and it was the book of Baruch. Yes, Baruch. Those of you who think that counting sheep is for lightweights and drift off to sleep, night-by night, rehearsing the names of the Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah...; will be unsettled. Which one is Baruch? Well might you ask. Baruch is one of the books in the *Apocrypha*. Up the road, in the universities, they suck their teeth over the *Apocrypha*, a rather random collection of texts. They sound Jewish, but they were written in Greek, and you have a feeling the authors are up to something. Baruch, you suspect has an agenda.

A quick history lesson to help us make sense of Baruch. Six hundred years, or so, before the birth of Christ, there was a great empire in the east. Here in England, it was all Celtic tribes squatting in mud huts in the mist, but in Babylon, where Nebuchadnezzar ruled there, were temples, canals and gardens. Perfume and cruelty, Babylon rested on military might. Little Judah and its king, in Jerusalem, paid tribute to keep that army away. Or, at least it did, until the king decided to stop paying. That was a bad idea, much more wisely Jehoiakim promptly died. His 19 year old son came to the throne and found the Babylonians at the gates. In 597, he surrendered. 2 Kings takes up the story

The king of Babylon ... carried off all the treasures of the house of the LORD... He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives... no one remained, except the poorest people of the land. 2 Kings 24:10-14

It was a catastrophe, the beginning of a shattering Exile. God promised the Jews a land remember, visited a Temple, and gave them a king. All gone, in a moment. When you hear Psalm 137 – it is the song of that exile

By the rivers of Babylon– there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

Terrible to describe, but worse was to come. A puppet king was left in Jerusalem, Zedekiah. He too rebelled, triggered Article 50, Jexit. Diplomacy was different then and in 587, Nebuchadnezzar's army returned and besieged Jerusalem. It is all described in the Book of Lamentations

*Our skin is black as an oven from the scorching heat of famine. Women are raped in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands
Lamentations 5:10-12*

Finally, the Babylonians broke into the city, King Zedekiah was forced to watch his sons being murdered and then saw nothing else. He was blinded, and taken, in chains, to Babylon.

And all this is the story behind the Book of Baruch. Do you remember the opening line?

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem

It is reassurance. There has been catastrophe, but better days coming. Baruch offers hope

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children... rejoicing that God has remembered them. Baruch 5:5

Baruch stares a crisis in the face and speaks words of reassurance. Baruch wants to tell us he has seen the worst that there can be, and yet still has hope. I have been there, he says, I knew this. The book begins,

These are the words of the book that Baruch son of Neriah ... wrote in Babylon, in the fifth year, at the time when the Chaldeans took Jerusalem and burned it with fire. Baruch 1:1-2

I told you the author was up to something. He is, as they say, 'economical with the truth'. This book is notoriously difficult to date but at least some of it was written long after the Chaldeans took Jerusalem. It *claims* it is writing about the crisis of the Exile, hundreds of years before; but truly, it is a very different story.

When the Babylonians took Jerusalem, they destroyed it. They pulled down the Temple and smashed the walls. Lamentations again

All who pass along the way clap their hands at you; they hiss and wag their heads at daughter Jerusalem; "Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?" Lamentations 2:15

Years later the Jews returned and rebuilt the city. Their troubles however were far from over and they were invaded again and again. Some of the story we read in Baruch dates from a crisis under a Greek speaking king when the Temple was defiled and the country was in open revolt. Baruch writes about Babylonians, he is thinking about Greeks.

Why am I telling you about the Book of Baruch? Well, I am a historian, and I like history lessons... and I should probably get out more. It is more than that, though. This is a study in how you handle crisis. In the midst of a national crisis someone sat down and wrote the Book of *Baruch*, about national crisis, because he thought it would help.

What happens in a national crisis? What happens to us in all the uncertainty over Brexit? What happens is that we lose the plot, literally. In wartime, we have an enemy, a map, a narrative. Now it is borders and backstops, soft, hard or referendum. We have no shared sense of direction. There is no story we can tell, just disagreement and division. That is why Baruch does not write about *his* crisis. Baruch writes about something else. He starts with the thing we can agree about, a story we do all know. It is as if he says 'Do you remember?' He reminds the Jews that they have survived crisis before. Here is reassurance.

There is a lot of reassurance in Baruch.

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Can we find words of reassurance in the midst of our crisis? Can Baruch help us? Yes, there are three lessons in this book.

Lesson One, we did not hear it this morning; but, earlier in the book, Baruch commands

pray for the life of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and for the life of his son Belshazzar, so that their days on earth may be like the days of heaven. Baruch 1:11

In the midst of crisis pray for your enemies. Now there are all kinds of ways of praying for your enemies. You could pray they might change their minds, you could pray they might be smitten with boils or lose their voices. What Baruch prays is that they might thrive. We have to pray ourselves into the future when we are enemies no longer. We pray our way onto God's future, and all of us will be there.

We can only do that if we have hope. That is **Lesson Two**. We have stopped hoping. In this sorry mess, that is the worst of our predicament. We can only talk in terms of 'the best of a bad job'. It is all compromised and qualified. Hope imagines what would be better. Hope is radical, startling. We can pray the best for each other if we have the imagination and confidence to think what the best might look like. We have forgotten how to do that. Baruch is full of hope

they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne

What does glory look like? There is a question worth asking.

Then, **Lesson Three**, this is a hope we must share. It has to be a hope for all of us. Baruch keep seeing a city and a nation that unites, gathers together

look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One

In Baruch, people have stopped taking sides. Baruch imagines what a city and a nation might do. It does seem to me that the Brexit debate, on both sides, is framed in terms of *particular* outcomes. Brexit will be good for *sovereignty*, or for *free trade*. Remaining will be good for *peace* or for the *free movement of people*. No one is talking about how we become a people with a *shared* hope; how we *all* flourish. Both sides of the debate have limited hope and limited ambition. As the Archbishop has argued, it is almost certainly the poor who will pay the price.

If we are going to rescue our politics, it will not be because one side of this debate wins and another loses. As things stand, we will all lose, because we will be less than we were, we will be divided. We have to work at a common hope. Really work, not vague promises but something specific. A properly *shared* hope means you can, you *should* pray for Mrs May, and Arlene Foster, and Jeremy Corbyn, and Jacob Rees Mogg and Sadiq Khan and all the others you or I find so hard to admire. We must want them to want them to flourish. We must name the future when we would rather describe the battle. We must hope with the same steely confidence that others contradict. We must pray when we would rather hector and defame. We think this choice defines us; it does not. We are defined by the love of God, created in the love of God, destined for the love of God.

Pray hard, hope hard, hope together. Then, with Baruch, we can build on the ruins and stand on the height to watch a scattered people finally come home.