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Chapter 1

'FOR GOD HAS ALSO LOST A SON'

A Biblical perspective of exile

'FOR GOD HAS ALSO LOST A SON'

After an act of sabotage, writes Elie Wiesel, Jewish author and Nobel Peace Prize winner about his time in Buna concentration camp, the Nazi guardians singled out three people who were to be executed in the presence of all the camp inmates. They were hanged and two men died quickly. But the third one, a 13-year old boy, was too thin and his weight was not enough to break his neck. His agony lasted more than half an hour and the prisoners were obliged to pass in front of him and look at him full in the face. Behind Wiesel a man asked, "Where is God now?" "And I heard a voice within me answer him. Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows..." (Cf. *Night*, E. Wiesel, London, 1981).

Human suffering, especially if inflicted by people, saps our faith and our belief in a merciful and compassionate God and maybe even in the ultimate goodness of humanity. Confronted by the tsunami in Asia, the war in Darfur, the endless anguish in Eastern Congo and in so many other places in our world, we wonder how God can allow such things to happen. Refugee camps, the plight of refugees or forcibly displaced women, children and men, are no exception: where is God in all this? How can we still dare to tell people God loves them?

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The Bible shows us how more than 2,500 years ago women and men were already asking themselves the same questions. The Old Testament (OT) tells us how the people of Israel suffered war, violence, famine, persecution, and exile, and how they tried to find the presence of the loving God of the covenant (Ex 34:6-7) in all those realities.

We are all familiar with the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, when God freed his people from slavery and guided them through Moses to the Promised Land, but we may be unaware that the people of Israel went into exile twice. In 721 BCE the northern kingdom fell to the king of Assyria and the population was scattered. In 586 BCE Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem, the south-

ern capital, destroyed the Temple and the city, and took part of the population captive. The country was desolate. During her time in exile, however, Israel deepened her knowledge of God, and her faith changed forever. Nowadays Israel's experience becomes precious to us as we get involved in refugee work. In the pages that follow I will explore what the OT tells us about this experience, also highlighting the connections with Jesus' life and teaching, as a possible source of inspiration for JRS' spirituality in mission.

1. God accompanies us in exile

There is no question of idealizing exile or forced displacement. Let us not be confounded. Its sheer existence is evil, and this is the way the Bible primarily looks at it. Nobody should feel obliged to flee one's land due to war, persecution or poverty. That is why the prophets sent by God to speak in his name and guide the people envisaged it first of all as a punishment that God might send upon Israel. In the 8th century BCE when Amos saw the people had strayed far from the paths of the Lord, he threatened them with exile: *Therefore thus says the LORD: "Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parcelled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land"* (Amos 7:17).

But it was another story when exile and deportation had actually fallen upon Israel and evil seemed to triumph making the innocent suffer. Was God actually punishing them? Habakkuk protested: *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails* (Hab 1:2-4). Jeremiah lost heart and despaired: *Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, "A child is born to you, a son", making him very glad... because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?* (Jer 20:14-18)

We are no different from them. The sight and experience of evil harm us deeply. We feel wounded and are tempted to think God has forgotten us or is not listening. This is why the prophet Isaiah told the Jewish community exiled in Babylon (6th century BCE): *But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands* (Is 49:14-16).

This is the key experience which must nurture our spiritual life: the closeness of God. God is with us. As a Burundian widow from Lukole camp in western Tanzania said: *God understands us for he has also lost a son*. Scholars debate the meaning of Yahweh (YHWH), God's name revealed to Moses in the OT, but there is no doubt in the Gospel. Jesus is also called 'Emmanuel' meaning *God is with us* (Mt 1:23), and his final words to the disciples are *I am with you all days till the end of the world* (Mt 28:20). Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross. He accompanies us in suffering and death too.

The prophets teach us, as do the psalms, that we should not break off our communication with God. In the Bible women and men keep talking to God in all sorts of situations, health or sickness, victory or defeat, success or failure. As such, no situation prevents our relationship with God. We just have to find our own way. Moses, Deborah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, Judith, Mary, Jesus... found their own words to express what they felt. There is nothing here against traditional prayers, only a call to discover the invitation men and women make to us from the Bible to address God spontaneously, with great freedom.

Interestingly enough Ignatius of Loyola shares these two intuitions. The point of departure of his Spiritual Exercises (SpEx), called *Principle and Foundation*, states that we should not seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, for we can serve God in all circumstances (SpEx 23). Later on, he advises us to talk with God as a friend talks to a friend (SpEx 54). Therefore the first call, especially when confronted by evil and suffering, is to keep in touch with God, linked to the source of good and love that he is. That is the only way to withstand evil. *Love alone can*

teach us to penetrate the hidden goodness of the things we know (Th. Merton). That is what Jesus himself did at Gethsemane (Mk 14:32-42).

2. An opportunity to renew our relationship with God and the other

This double biblical intuition, shared by Ignatius, that God is present in any situation and that we can communicate with him does not imply sickness is equal to health or war to peace. Absolutely not. What it does mean is that the challenge for us is to discover how God is present in exile, what God is telling us. If exile means neither punishment nor abandonment by God, then we need to change our sight to discover its significance. The prophet Ezekiel wrote to people who had suffered exile: *[Thus says the LORD God:] I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God* (Ezek 36:24-28).

The word of God is sharper than a double-edged sword (Heb 4:12) and challenges our pre-conceptions. Israel had to learn not to make of the land an absolute

value, even if it was the Promised Land. God wants to free people from exile, as from any kind of oppression, but in God's eyes the liberation from sin, from any kind of evil brought about by our actions and attitudes, is at least as important as liberation from exile. The situation prior to forced displacement is not necessarily the ideal to seek. We can deceive ourselves thinking of return or longing for resettlement while forgetting our neighbour's need close to us. Experience teaches us that to be in one's own land is no better for justice

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and peace if our hearts are still filled with hatred, envy, selfishness or violence. Exile appears then as a chance for conversion (M. Raper,

After seeing the worst of us in what causes it, exile may bring about the best in us.

Everybody's Challenge), an opportunity to come to know God better, the way he is present and active in history and in our lives, what he wants from us, and, ultimately, who he is. It is a chance to let God change our hearts so we may change our lives and relationships.

After seeing the worst of us in what causes it, exile may bring about the best in us (F. Masawe SJ). Let us briefly see how we can recognize and accompany God's action:

a) **The sign of God is at hand.** As simple and ordinary, and, at the same time, full of life, as a child who is born: *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel* (Is 7:14). This is also the sign chosen by God for the coming of Christ which was given to the shepherds (Lk 2:8-18) and the wise men (Mt 2:9-12). The images Jesus chose for his parables are also taken from every day life (Mk 4:26-32; Mt 13:1-52).

b) **The sign of God is non-violent:** *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice* (Is 42:1-3).

c) **God comes to us through the other:** *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, here I am* (Is 58: 6-9). We

cannot separate love for God from love for our neighbour, as St John said: *Those who say, "I love God", and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen* (1 Jn 4:20).

3. Time to discover the real face of God as a source of hope

Today, it is commonplace to speak of the three big monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although the three affirm that there is only one God, the influence of Judaism on the shaping of the other two in this regard is evident, as it is much older. But when did this belief in one God start in Israel? For some centuries after settling in the land of Canaan, Israel struggled among the Canaanite peoples to keep the faith in the Lord (YHWH). All the peoples around Israel had several gods, while, in contrast, Israel proclaimed her faith in one God. Then, in the middle part of the 6th century BCE, a prophet arose from among the deportees in Babylon. We even ignore his name. He is known only as Second Isaiah, as his writings were added to the book of Isaiah. Today we find them in chapters 40-55. This prophet proclaimed: *Thus says the LORD "I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god... I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host... There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other"* (Is 45:5,12,21-22).

How can I harm the life of another if our lives are both the gift of the same God?

An exile was the first human being to affirm monotheism and deportees were the first persons to believe in it. For the first time in her history Israel heard that not only had she one god, but that her god was the unique God. All the peoples of the earth had to turn to this God for it was the only one. Today we consider monotheism as the first call to peace and solidarity. The fact that we believe all human beings share the same creator helps us to realize the atrocity of war and violence. How can I harm the life of another if our lives are both the gift of the same God? To go to war

saying that 'God is with us', 'Allah Akbar' or 'in God we trust' is simply blasphemy, that is, we are making wrongful use of God's name (cf. Ex 20:7). We are manipulating God. Whoever believes in one God must admit that God cannot be for one people and against the other. Friends and enemies share the same God. The God of Israel, the God of Christianity and the God of Islam are ultimately the same and one God albeit perceived through different cultural and religious traditions.

This God is willing to continue to reveal himself again in exile. God is in our history, in our present, and also in our future. We have God's promise through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel: *Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, "As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt", but "As the LORD lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." Then they shall live in their own land (Jer 23:7-8). Thus says the Lord GOD: "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil". (Ezek 37:12-14)*

The promise brings us hope. The Lord has committed his name to liberation, he has given his word. As God did in the Exodus, he is engaged to free his people and to give his spirit to us. But as Ezekiel says, we will know God's power not only if return eventually happens, but already when he brings us up from our graves and makes us live. The challenge of life is already posed to us. The real return is not from one land to another, but from death to life, from antagonism among us to solidarity, from rivalry to community building. If all this is missing, no land can be the promised one, none can be holy.

4. What about Jesus?

On 24 September 1995, a few days after my arrival in Tanzania, I entered the chapel of Lukole camp for the first time – built by



*The flight to Egypt, painting in the chapel of Centro Astalli, JRS Italy
Photo: L. Putti*

Burundian refugees – to attend mass. I was struck by the painting on the wall behind the altar: Joseph taking Mary and the child to Egypt to protect Jesus from King Herod’s wrath (cf. Mt 2:13-22). Years later I found the same scene in the chapel of Centro Astalli in Rome, this time a colourful picture drawn by an Ethiopian refugee. This text of the Gospel of Matthew, the flight to Egypt, lies deep in our hearts as we see Jesus becoming a refugee himself, his parents forced to flee to save their child’s life. I think the text somehow supplements what we read towards the end of the same Gospel of Matthew in the parable of

the final judgement (Mt 25:31-46), when we hear Jesus saying: *Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me* (Mt 25:34-35).

The text could easily go on: *For I was a refugee and you accompanied me, you served me, and you advocated my cause.* Sometimes the word of God becomes transparent: *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me* (Mt 25:40). To hear this may not make things any easier when we are struggling with the problems and conflicts of every day life in JRS. But it can give us hope when we stop for a while and draw breath to realize that even when we wonder *Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?* (Mt 25:37), Christ is always

the Emmanuel, and is waiting for us in the people we meet.

For I was a refugee and you accompanied me, you served me, and you advocated my cause.

It is true that during his adult life Jesus was neither a refugee nor did he work with displaced people. However, we see him reaching out people in

need through his teaching and especially his healings and miracles. The gospels show us Jesus concerned with the integral welfare of the human being. Pity draws him to the crowds of people who had nobody to take care of them and he assists and feeds them (Mk 6:34ff). He dares to trespass social, cultural and religious boundaries when he heals a man on the Sabbath (Mk 1:21-28) or a leper by touching him (Mk 1:40-45) or, conversely, when he accepts that a woman with a flow of a blood may touch him (Mk 5:25-34). Amid all these encounters, there is another one – maybe not so well known – that can help especially to root our hope as JRS members. It is Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30) or, rather, her encounter with him, as Mark tells us that Jesus did not want to meet anybody at the time (Mk 7:24). The setting is noteworthy: Jesus is alone – the disciples do not appear in the passage – and has left Jewish land to go to the pagan territory of Tyre in the

northwest. He enters a house and wants to remain incognito but a woman, a native of that region, a Syrophenician, that is, a Greek with a different religion and culture, breaks into the house and requests that Jesus heal her daughter who is possessed by an evil spirit.

Jesus rejoins: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs* (Mk 7:27). Jesus' words take us by surprise. Why is he refusing her? We cannot accept that Jesus is testing the woman as some scholars thought in the past. Rather, it seems as if Jesus shares the views of his people who looked down on non-Jews as dogs because they did not belong to the chosen people. An attitude maybe worsened by the fact that Galilee, Jesus' home region, was exploited economically by the more developed Syrophenicia which used to tap into Galilean agricultural products.

But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mk 7:28) The woman is quick. She does not question Jesus' statement openly. She keeps using Jesus' image of children and dogs, but she manages to break the temporal separation and introduces a definite change: the dogs do not have to wait, for actually, even if it is through the crumbs, they partake in the bread at the same time as the children! *Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter"*. *So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone* (Mk 7:29-30). We feel relieved. Jesus' first words mounted the suspense... But then he announces the child is free from her sickness, and the woman returns home to find her daughter healed.

We have been trying hitherto to keep the perspective of exile: what Israel experienced, felt, heard in exile about God, how God communicated with her, how Jesus, Mary and Joseph became refugees according to the Gospel of Matthew. Now this text of Mark brings a new perspective. Jesus is not a refugee but he leaves his land on his own accord. This may be more the case of the JRS worker who leaves her or his country, or town, or just her or his house every day to join JRS. How can Jesus inspire us?

Jesus' situation and reaction can be ours: He is in a foreign territory, he is met by a stranger who crushes his plans of tranquillity, who happens to be a woman of different culture and religion, and maybe even a representative of those who oppress his people, and she is requesting help. And Jesus answers 'no'. However, the woman comes back with humility and intelligence, with the courage of a mother fighting for her daughter, and Jesus is capable of acknowledging defeat. *For that word* says Jesus literally in Greek (Mk 7:29). He knows the demon is gone but he has to accept that he is not the one making the healing happen. The cause has been the woman's response to Jesus. God, Father and Mother, has heard that word and has granted the healing. I think in that word said by the woman, Jesus hears his father's voice telling him to break down the barrier of his prejudices and to accept the intrusion of the other in need. Gender, origin, culture, and religion separated Jesus from the woman. Moreover, he did not want to be disturbed. The woman teaches Jesus to bridge those differences.

When we feel difference cuts us apart, that a new demand breaks our plans, when we are exhausted or fed up with our work, even tired of being taken advantage of, and we feel our prejudice is making someone else pay for it, we may find it consoling to know Jesus also found himself in a similar situation and refused to accept the other in need. Jesus understands us for he was in the same situation. We can still hope. The woman insisted and Jesus finally allowed this stranger to enter his life and indeed he discovered how God was talking to him through her. The woman taught him that everybody has right to God's salvation. As Elías, one Jesuit companion put it, the woman converted Jesus. Hopefully, like Jesus, we will also be able to learn something if we allow ourselves to be defeated by the other!

***They have made you
a better person.***

These few pages are filled with "we", "us" ... It is true the perspective of refugees differs from that of JRS' workers or volunteers. Despite the differences I consider that what we share is more than what makes us different. From the Bible we learn we are all children of God, sharing our human condition, the search for good, justice and beauty, the search for God. Because we all seek, we can help one

another along the road. During my time in JRS I have tried to accompany, serve and advocate the cause of refugees. However, as the Syrophoenician woman enlightened Jesus, my experience is that refugees have helped me in many more ways. In Lukole and Lumasi, in San Saba and Lainé, refugees have been my masters of prayer and friendship, of hospitality and generosity, of commitment to life and community, of work and relentless hope. As a friend told me, *they have made you a better person*. The message of the Bible is clear. It happened to Israel and Jesus, it may also happen to us: exile is not a stumbling stone; it becomes the cornerstone for our faith and life!

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