

Donnybrook

12 August 2021

Welcome

From time to time, some particular story or scene from the Old Testament is difficult for us. That experience goes up a notch with the book of Joshua, because the whole book is the story of the entry into the land and the dislocations of the natives, such as the Jebusites etc.

Steps

With our own history of colonisation, we feel for the dispossessed. An Israeli friend of mine once asked me why the Irish – the people and our government – were so pro-Palestinian...“was it the underdog?” I responded with the story of the plantation of Ulster: the Scottish planters were the chosen people, Ulster was the promised land and we, the native Irish Catholics, were the Canaanites, worshipping false gods. We feel, in these post-colonial times, the injustice of invasion.

We could ask a different question about today’s reading: how would it have been heard originally? Again, a bit of history helps. The independent state of David and Solomon was very short lived and most of the history of ancient Israelites was one of imperial domination and many deportations. The great Exile in Babylon was the most painful and destructive – and still they hoped in God, a God who would set them free, a God who would bring them home, a saving God. As Isaiah put it so poetically,

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:11)

Conclusion

That last image may speak to us today. As Christian believers, we are experiencing dislocation, a kind of exile within the culture. We need to strengthen our hope in the ultimate guidance of God. Perhaps exile is the natural state of the Christian. An early Christian writer put it strikingly like this:

They live in their own countries, but only as nonresidents; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. (Diognetus 5:5 AF-E)