

‘Seeking the Shalom of Dunedin’

**Sermon / Kauwhau given at Service of Worship
on Sunday 12 October 2025, led by Graham Redding,
at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand**

Texts: Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7, Luke 17:11–19

When the prophet Jeremiah wrote his letter to the exiles in Babylon, he was addressing a people who had lost almost everything that had defined them. Jerusalem was far behind them. The temple lay in ruins. They were living in the heart of an empire that neither shared their faith nor respected their traditions. The exiles were asking: *How do we live faithfully in this strange land? Do we hold out for return? Do we separate ourselves? Do we resist at all costs?*

Jeremiah’s response? He doesn’t tell them to fight, to escape, or to keep their bags packed. He tells them to settle in: Build houses. Plant gardens. Marry, have children, live ordinary lives. And above all, seek the welfare — the shalom — of the city where you now live. For in its welfare, he declares, you will find your own.

I want to look at this key text through the writings of three scholars: Walter Brueggemann, Kathleen O’Connor, and Andrew Root.

Walter Brueggemann calls this passage a summons into a new imagination. Exile was not simply a political event for the people of ancient Israel; it was a theological crisis. Without temple, king, or land, what does it mean to belong to God? Brueggemann argues that exile shattered every structure of certainty, forcing Israel to discover God in fresh, unanticipated ways.

Jeremiah’s letter resists two temptations. First, denial: the false prophets who promised a quick end to exile. Second, sectarian withdrawal: the temptation to form ghetto communities, retreating from the world and waiting it out. Instead, Jeremiah calls for a third way — a daring act of neighbourly imagination: “Seek the welfare of the city.”

This is astonishing. Babylon is not just any city. It is the city responsible for Jerusalem’s destruction, for burning the temple, and dragging Israel into captivity. Yet God says: *its shalom is bound up with your shalom*.

Brueggemann helps us see that this command is not resignation. To plant gardens in enemy soil is to defy despair. To pray for Babylon is to resist hatred. To invest in the city’s flourishing is to discover God’s presence beyond the safe walls of Jerusalem.

Core message: the life of faith is always lived *where you are, not where you wish you were*.

For Knox Church, this speaks directly to us. It's easy to look back nostalgically at the days when this and other churches were bursting at the seams, when pews were filled most Sundays, when the church's voice was central in civic life. It's also tempting to throw up our hands in despair, to say that secularisation has swept everything away. But Jeremiah tells us: neither nostalgia nor despair leads to life. Instead, we are called to live faithfully, fully, and creatively *here and now*.

Kathleen O'Connor looks at the Jeremiah text through a trauma-informed lens. The exiles, she says, were a broken people. Uprooted, humiliated, grieving. In trauma, people feel powerless, voiceless, cut off from hope. Into this pain, Jeremiah's words restore agency. *Build, plant, marry, multiply*. Ordinary verbs, but to a people stripped of control, they are transformative. You can still build. You can still plant. You can still marry and bear children. You can still pray. You are not finished. God is not done with you.

O'Connor shows us how this passage turns trauma into possibility. Healing begins not by denying pain but by finding ways to live faithfully in the midst of it. For exiles — ancient and modern — this is a word of dignity. Refugees resettling in new lands. Migrants struggling with cultural displacement. Communities rebuilding after disaster. Jeremiah's letter says: your story is not over. You can flourish, even here. Out of your trauma, new ways of understanding God, worship, and community can emerge.

For us, the cultural displacement of the church can feel like loss. There is grief in this. There is dislocation when the wider culture no longer shares some of our Christian assumptions. But O'Connor reminds us that God can use this trauma to reshape identity and imagination. A church that knows what it means to be dislocated can stand in solidarity with other dislocated persons and communities: migrants, refugees, students far from home, or anyone who feels estranged in this city. The wounds of exile can open us to the wounds of others.

Andrew Root, reflecting on the church in the West, warns us against romanticising exile. Too often, he says, Christians declare, "We are an exiled people in a hostile secular world!" as if we are innocent victims of persecution. But the reality is far more complex. Sometimes the church is marginalised not for its faithfulness but for its failures — when it clings to power, when it excludes, when it betrays its calling, when it stigmatises rather than pursues justice for the vulnerable.

Root takes Jeremiah as a model for a different kind of presence. Instead of nostalgia for Christendom — the days when the church enjoyed privilege and influence — Jeremiah calls us to settle into the realities of a secular world, to engage with it

attentively, to revise some of our own beliefs and assumptions in the light of that engagement, and to discover that God may be encountered and truth revealed in places we had not expected.

In a society that no longer centres the church, the question is not: *How do we get our power and influence back?* The question is: *How do we seek the shalom of the world around us?* Not by circling the wagons. Not by shouting angrily at the culture. But by investing in the common good, by blessing neighbours, by praying for the city.

Root reads Jeremiah 29 as a summons to find God in ordinary, everyday life. Planting gardens, raising children, working for the good of the neighbourhood are not distractions from faith but expressions of it.

For churches like Knox, this is a call to cultivate a spirituality of presence. To see God not only in the beauty of this sanctuary but in the rhythms of George Street, in the struggles of the university, in the creativity of the arts community, in the quiet work of those who serve the homeless, accompany the lonely, or care for patients, families, and staff at the Dunedin Hospital. Our faith is not meant to hover above the city but to be woven into its life, open to what the secular world teaches, challenges, and reveals to us about God and neighbour ... and what it means to be human.

Jeremiah's most radical command is this: *Seek the shalom of the city ... for in its shalom you will find your shalom.*

Shalom is more than peace; it is flourishing, wholeness, justice, reconciliation. Jeremiah dares to say: your wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of this foreign city, even this city of your enemies.

What does this mean for Knox Church? It means that our fate is not separate from that of the city around us. Jeremiah's call to the exiles was clear: *seek the welfare of the city where you live, for in its welfare you will find your own.* As Murray Rae recently highlighted in an excellent opinion piece in the *Otago Daily Times*, this means recognising that the wellbeing of our neighbours — especially those on the margins — directly shapes the wellbeing of the whole city. If students are crushed by debt and pressure, we cannot thrive while ignoring them. If migrants are scapegoated, we cannot prosper by retreating into comfort. If families are locked out of affordable housing, our calling is bound up with their struggle. If loneliness pervades the elderly, the city's welfare is diminished — and so is ours.

In this, we are reminded of Jesus' healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17: only one returned to give thanks and recognise God at work. Like that one, we are called not only to act for the good of our city but to see and acknowledge the ways God is already at work in its people — students, migrants, workers, neighbours — and to join in with gratitude, humility, and faithful presence.

Jeremiah and Luke together call us to both action and recognition. For Knox, this could look like:

- Beauty as gift: continuing to offer music, art, and worship not only for our own enjoyment, but as a blessing to the city.
- Hospitality as witness: opening doors and making our facilities, including the Knox Garden, available for conversations, for students and workers needing space, for migrants seeking welcome, for hospital families needing rest, and for anyone searching for community.
- Advocacy as faithfulness: speaking for housing justice, inclusion, and care for the vulnerable.
- Prayer as solidarity: taking seriously Jeremiah's command to "pray for the city," remembering that our wellbeing is intertwined with the wellbeing of the wider Dunedin community.

Jeremiah wrote not to dreamers of a lost past or escape artists looking for a quick exit, but to ordinary people in a strange land, telling them: *live fully here, pray here, work here, love here.*

Jesus reminds us that when healing comes, when life is restored, the true gift is in recognising God at work and giving thanks. So may it be for Knox Church. Not a nostalgic remnant. Not a despairing minority. But a people who, in this time and place, seek the shalom of Dunedin — believing that in its flourishing, we too will find life. Amen.

Knox Presbyterian Church, Ōtepoti Dunedin

Our vision is to see the reign of God, made known in Jesus, have a transformative effect on people's lives and on the world in which we live.



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