Irish Council of Churches, April 2014

From Holy Remnant to Aliens and Exiles

Introduction

I was invited to speak on the Theology of the Remnant. (Slide 1) You see I've changed the title – reasons will become clear as we proceed.

A student in the heyday of Biblical Theology, I have a vivid memory of a clever diagram (Slide 2) – a big X – Israel at the top, gradually narrowing down through the 10 lost tribes, passing through the remnant of Judah, till we reach Christ at the centre (little X), Christ alone fulfilling God's election and covenant, and then opening out to the ever expanding church – those in Christ.

[Outline: great kingdom of David and Solomon divided into two, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Amos and Hosea prophets foretelling God's judgement: the end of the northern kingdom when Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Other great prophets associated with the southern kingdom and Jerusalem, which fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC, élite taken into exile. 50 years or so later Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonian Empire and allowed people to return to their homelands.]

The 10 tribes of the northern kingdom were lost, then, and only a remnant survived the period of exile. So Biblical theologians latched onto the idea of the remnant and it was read into texts which didn't use the language, not just in the Old Testament, but also in the New. It was inspiring, optimistic --- and dangerous, because it easily conspires with Christian anti-Judaism, supersessionism, and those aspects of Christian triumphalism rightly challenged by post-Holocaust sensibilities. Theme does seem to have faded. Even back then it was admitted that Hebrew words associated with the remnant idea could appear in all kinds of ordinary contexts, meaning simply what's left over (for example, the widow's oil, manna, etc,), or it just meant 'the survivors'. So on linguistic grounds alone more caution is needed. Yet my reappraisal of the biblical material could certainly make the theme pertinent now to the church in the Western world.

Before the Exile

Though not all that frequent, there's no getting away from the fact that the phrase 'the remnant of Jacob/Israel' did become a bit of a catchphrase in the prophetic tradition. It first comes into use among the great prophets of Judah. Isaiah, charged with messages of disaster if the people didn't repent and change their ways, also encouraged absolute trust in God and predicted the survival of a remnant: (Slide 3)

> On that day, the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will … lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel were like the

> sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed ..
> (Isaiah 10.20-22)

A prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah, Isaiah lived through the time when the northern kingdom fell. He named his son Shear-jashub (7.3) = ‘a remnant shall return’, while 11.11-16 suggests he may have had a grand vision of the full restoration of all 12 tribes and of exiles returning as they had once come up from the land of Egypt. The famous passage about the shoot from the stump of Jesse (11.1) may also imply this remnant, particularly if we compare two other passages.

> The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward; for from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors. (37.31-2)

Isaiah is to preach

> …until cities lie waste … the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a 10th part remain in it, it will be burnt again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.
> (6.12-13; NB climax of call-vision)

In Isaiah's own time disaster was averted in the reign of Hezekiah – Sennacherib’s dramatic withdrawal from besieging Jerusalem is found in Greek sources as well as II Kings 19 // Isaiah 37, but Isaiah’s message about judgement and repentance continued. All through Isaiah urged trust in God, not in allies or armaments – under Ahaz then Hezekiah, and the hope of a remnant is deeply connected with that trust.

The phrase the ‘remnant of Jacob’ also appears among the prophecies of Micah (5.7-9); (Slide 4) certainly Zephaniah, a generation later, looks forward in trust – a remnant of the house of Judah will have their fortunes restored (2.7) – and there's a promise that the remnant of Israel will be humble, lowly, doing no wrong, rather than proud and haughty, seeking refuge in the name of Lord, and the Lord will take away the judgements against them (3.11-15). So that catch-phrase, ‘the remnant of Jacob/ Israel/ Judah’, seems to have caught on as a way of expressing hope for the future in the midst of disaster. But despite the language in the textbooks of ‘holy remnant’ or ‘righteous remnant’, there’s nothing in these passages to suggest that the remnant survives *because of* its righteousness or holiness. It survives because God chooses or elects to save some. Occasionally we find the promise that God will make them righteous, but their sufferings imply that meanwhile they too are under judgement.

We move on to the period when disaster came to Jerusalem – Jeremiah and Ezekiel lived through the crisis. In both cases, doubts have been raised as to whether they use the

remnant idea in the same way as we've seen so far. It's been suggested that in Jeremiah the word simply means 'survivors' with no particular theological freight. However, Jeremiah 23.3 does see God gathering the remnant of the flock out of all the lands where they've been scattered, as does 31.7. What does seem to be true is that the application became potentially contested: who could claim to be the remnant? In Jeremiah, after Jerusalem's fall, the phrase, 'the remnant of Judah', is applied, not to the exiles but to the people *left behind* in Judah (40.11; 42.2, 15, 19). Jeremiah pleads with them not to go to Egypt, then predicts that the remnant of Judah will perish in Egypt and none will return to Judah (44.12-14), though a few will return (44.28). Ezekiel speaks of survivors being scattered to the four winds (5.10, 6.8) and fears that even the remnant is to be brought to an end (11.13) – but in response the word of the Lord speaks of those scattered being gathered, and given a new heart and a new spirit. That sounds as if the remnant is the exiles, yet elsewhere survivors are to be left in Jerusalem (14.22) or be destroyed by fire and sword (23.25). For Jeremiah and Ezekiel, hope is less clearly related to the remnant idea; rather it is signalled in predictions of a new covenant, or of the re-creation of Israel as signified by the vision of resurrection in the valley of dry bones. For both of them, particular groups of survivors are still under judgement.

After the Exile

After the exile the catch-phrase reappears, and there seems an increasing tendency for the remnant to be identified specifically with the returnees. (Slide 5) In Haggai and Zechariah there's a certain ambiguity – on the initiative of returnees the surviving community of Jerusalem is urged to rebuild the Temple. But 80 or so years later, with the activities of Nehemiah and Ezra, it's clear that the various waves of returnees constitute the remnant, over against the 'people of the land', from whom they are to be separated. The classic account suggests that those who had remained in the land had not only intermarried with settlers who were non-Israelites, but had let their religious practices become syncretistic and impure. That's certainly how it appeared to the returnees – they, not others, were the elect remnant, returning to ensure the purity of the restored nation. In summary, the perspectives of Ezra-Nehemiah are these:[1]

- The returning exiles think of themselves as 'special' – as holier than those who remained behind and didn't experienced the 'purifying ordeal' of exile. So they equate the 'people of the land' with foreigners, not part of the true Israel.
- They need to explain what happened to their past great kingdom. Foreign wives had been blamed for faithlessness in the time of the great prophets. So now the prohibition of intermarriage becomes a prime target for ensuring future purity.
- They portray the return as a second 'exodus', and try to ensure the present rebuilding exactly reproduces the past. Temple and law are re-established, family

[1] Distilled from the discussion of Ezra-Nehemiah in Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

genealogy reconstructed. The only future they can conceive is nostalgic restoration of the old order.

- All this adds up to the need to define boundaries, to exclude and separate, so as to create a ritually pure ideal Israel – an ideological 'holy remnant'.

Now these are the typical reactions of people living with fear and insecurity. There are plenty of parallels in Christian history – splinter groups getting into holy huddles, or the church itself excluding those who don't seem holy enough. The sorry tale of Christian anti-Semitism is the mirror image of the exclusivity of Ezra and Nehemiah. Today we use the phrase 'ethnic cleansing' to describe the actions of those who find it impossible to live alongside others who are different – groups which strive to exclude in their desperate need to preserve their own identity and separate from those who don't belong.
As the mother of a son born with profound learning disabilities I've long reflected on how societies react to people who don't fit. I've found helpful the analysis of the anthropologist, Mary Douglas. In her book, *Purity and Danger*, she explored religious regulations like the distinction between clean and unclean foods in the book of Leviticus. She points out that every society has 'purity' regulations. Purity implies the removal of dirt. Dirt is relative – 'matter out of place'. Dirt implies a 'set of ordered relations and contravention of that order…' Our apprehension of the world involves the development of a culture which organises our perceptions, classifies and labels, and as individuals, we're educated into the culture of the social group to which we belong. 'Culture … provides in advance some basic categories, a … pattern in which ideas and values are tightly ordered.' My mother told me my first words were 'pretty' and 'dirty'. This ordered system, however, is challenged by what Douglas calls 'anomalies' and 'ambiguities' – things that do not fit. The desire for purity, she suggests, proves to be 'hard and dead'; 'purity is the enemy of change'. The crucial thing is how a society copes with anomalies. It may exclude, or re-interpret within the system. Or it may respond so as to generate something creative. There's power in the margins. The things that do not fit, the marginal or liminal, may produce revulsion, shock or laughter, but also provoke novelty. Religious ritual, she suggests, is a way of dealing with taboo and terrible things so as to produce cleansing and new life. She suggests a parable: the gardener tidies, orders, or we might say 'purifies' the garden by taking out the weeds. If the weeds are burned or thrown away, that's that. But if the weeds are turned into compost, then the 'anomalies' become life-giving.

Most human societies struggle to welcome difference. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors could not support anyone infirm or incapable, whether through age, injury or disability. They had to find ways of reinterpreting the birth of an 'anomaly', to deal with the challenge and shock. Mary Douglas gives an example from the Nuer tribe:

> ... when a monstrous birth occurs, the defining lines between humans and animals may be threatened. If a monstrous birth can be labelled an event of a peculiar kind the categories can be restored. So the Nuer treat monstrous births as baby hippopotamuses, accidentally born to humans, and with this labelling, the appropriate action is clear. They gently lay them in the river where they belong...

Societies in the grip of high modernity did something somewhat similar when they employed the medical model as a way of justifying the exclusion of people with disabilities into special hospitals. The early twentieth century fascination with genetic purity reinforced that and led to the Nazi policy of 'cleansing' society of people with defects, not just those with the wrong ethnicity like Jews and Gipsies. But these attempts to achieve purity, as Mary Douglas suggests, prevent the creative from happening. It's when these tendencies are exposed, judged and transformed that profound breakthroughs can occur.

The Holy Remnant idea runs the risk of being a dead end. The post-exilic model of the Remnant fits into Mary Douglas' account of a society driven by desire for a purity which is hard and dead, the enemy of change. That's why my title for this address is *From Holy Remnant to Aliens and Exiles*. (Slide 6) I want to suggest that the exile provides a more creative model, and we need to shift from the mentality of the returnees to the mentality of the exiles. So let's go back to the period of exile.

The Exile

The time of the exile was particularly creative. National disaster, it seems, led to a process of conservation, collection and preservation of the records and traditions of the people, and a start on the process of weaving them into the books that have come down to us. The very process of preserving the message of prophets, from Amos and Hosea through Isaiah and others, implies acceptance of their warning that all are under judgement yet, with repentance and trust in God, new things are possible. (Slide 7) It's interesting to reflect on the story of the Flood: there are significant Babylonian parallels to this ancient story, and it may well be that the story was picked up during the exile. But as told in Genesis, the story reflects the pattern of the prophetic message, a pattern that begins to affect understanding of all the old traditions – God's judgement on sin (the deluge) is the occasion of the rescue of a remnant – indeed a remnant of the whole creation as the animals go into the Ark two by two. Thus a 'typology' is created, which is repeated again and again in the Bible. To take another example, the notion of remnant appears in Genesis 45, a passage I've long regarded as a kind of key to scripture as a whole. The back-story... Joseph reveals himself. Brothers terrified. Joseph says:

> … do not be distressed or angry with yourselves… God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God… (Gen. 45.5, 7-8)

The story is surely presented in terms arising from reflection on judgement and exile, with the clear hint that God can bring life even out of the sin committed by Joseph's brothers. Scripture, then, is widely patterned on this rhythm of human sin and faithlessness, consequent judgement and the preservation of a remnant through God's grace and mercy.

Indeed the theme is picked up by Paul, who applies it to his own time as he agonises over the salvation of his fellow Jews in Romans 9 to 11. He quotes Isaiah 10,

> "Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively."

Then adds from Isaiah 1.9:

> "If the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah."

Later he picks up Isaiah's image of the stump and shoot, as he speaks of branches broken off and others grafted onto the olive-tree which represents God's people. His long involved argument implicitly draws attention to that pattern of judgement and saved remnant, while emphasising that all depends on God's election, grace and mercy. Indeed, Gentile believers shouldn't be complacent – they could find themselves cut off just the same, and Paul's climax is the hope is that those he describes as the ones 'to whom belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs and, according to the flesh, the Messiah' (9.4-5) will be grafted back in (11.24) through God's mercy. The Epistle to the Hebrews picks up Psalm 95, with its reference to days of testing in the wilderness, warning Christians that they too will come under judgement and fail to enter into the promised rest if disobedient. Both Psalm and Epistle reinforce the sense of a pattern repeated through Scripture; rather than a unique big X with Christ as a little X at the centre, (Slide 8) there's something perennial going on here, something articulated at the time of the exile, but applicable to the ups and downs of God's people, Jews and Christians, across the sweep of history. Two things are striking: God's freedom to preserve a remnant, just on the basis of the divine mercy and grace; and the hope for a remnant arising from sheer trust in God – not some claim to exceptional righteousness or holiness which exempts from judgement.

The letter inviting me to address the Theology of the Remnant sketched the situation of the churches in Ireland as the context in which might be applicable. I reckon it's mostly up to you to make specific connections, but I do want to suggest that exile rather than restoration provides a potentially creative model for the church in the modern Western world – to which club I welcome Ireland. Most European churches have been struggling since the 60s, perhaps especially the churches in the UK – reeling from 200 years of intellectual challenge, from the end of Christendom, from suspicions of hypocrisy, loss of respect and serious moral criticisms – not to mention the secularisation that validates drift from the church, the individualism that treats authority with scepticism and the sheer distractions of consumerism. The last thing we can afford to do is go into a holy huddle and separate from the world, seeking a purity which is hard and dead. We need creativity,

readiness to let new things happen. So let me pick out four themes for reflection. (Slide 9) The first two arise straight out of our Bible study and can be taken together:

Accepting Judgement and Relying on God Alone

One of the intriguing aspects of John's Gospel is the way in which judgement is inbuilt into the story. Jesus did not come to judge:

> God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3.17);

but judgement happens anyway (3.18-9):

> This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world and human beings loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds be exposed.

Judgement is exposure.

Judgement long since became an important aspect of my reflections on severe disability. For it's in crisis (the Greek word *krisis* means judgement) that we're shown up for what we are, by the way we react. It's a kind of test, showing up people, their relationships and their values for what they are. Our societies are judged by the way they treat disabled people. On the one hand, there's real concern and progressive thinking, on the other, disability hate crime – instances of exploitation or cruelty surface regularly in the media, not to mention cases of abuse in care homes. Judgement occurs through exposure.

Redemption begins with exposure, with judgement. On the cross Christ sharpened the judgement, showing up the pride and self confidence of religious people who thought they were doing God's will in getting rid of him, the compromise of a Pilate who was only doing his job in trying to keep the peace in the most notoriously turbulent province of the Empire, the weakness of friends who turned and ran, betrayed and denied… Here was a *krisis*, a moment of judgement in which people, individuals and institutions, were shown up. Christ sharpened the judgement and bore the consequences. Judgement is the other side of love's coin. There's no mercy without justice, no love without demand and expectation. Love expects loyalty, sets standards, passionately wants the best *of* the loved one, as well as *for* him or her. Standards mean judgement, testing, criticism – these are part of love. Redemption comes through judgement. The resolution of the 'gone-wrongness' of humankind requires its exposure.

In John's Gospel the deepest sin is disclosed as a kind of 'false consciousness'. In the story of the healing of the blind man, the Pharisees end up asking, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus indicates that their sin is evident in the very fact that they claim to see. Forgiveness

can only be received if the offender is prepared to climb down. The racist is blind to the sin of his/her attitude, but judgement takes place. Those who commit disability hate crimes are blind to the sin of their attitude, but judgement takes place. The love of God is a love which is searing like live coals, for our own good. It's purging and painful, searching out the hidden contamination of sin to which we like to close our eyes. In this time after Christendom, what are the sins of the church that are being exposed? Can our eyes be opened? Repentance, *metanoia*, means change of mind. Accepting judgement means letting the exposure of ecclesial failure to represent Christ on earth transform the church, ourselves and our expectations.

And it also means re-discovering trust. I don't underestimate the difficulties in living in trust, despite what's happening. Personal/AT… Cf. story of Elijah – 'I alone am left'…

Re-engaging creatively with the past

From struggling with the why questions, the issues of theodicy so pervasive in modernity, to seeing my son as privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity…
A persistent biblical image comes from pruning – the stump, cut back to the roots, which produces new growth. The pruning of the vine in John 15 uses the Greek word, *katharsis*, the word for purification; it's through drastic pruning, cutting back to the essentials, that the fruits of Spirit may be produced.

The time of exile was creative in enabling the gathering of inherited traditions and their editing in terms of new perspectives on how God was at work in Israel's past and present. In our time of exile are we called to engage in a similar process, to find things forgotten in the tradition, to challenge assumptions and unbalanced emphases, ask whether the world's critique of the church has moral validity, whether the challenge of other faiths should put our own in a different perspective? I could suggest controversial examples of where this might be happening: Where the early church asked questions about how to reconcile scriptural statements about the oneness of God and the nature of Christ, we find ourselves trying to discern how far traditional ethical teaching about marriage and sexuality is or is not grounded in scripture and vital to our identity. We might also ask ourselves whether too many unwanted babies in an already over-populated world is a greater moral scandal than abortion; and whether acceptance of death might not reflect the love of Christ better than officiously keeping people alive with machines. But are these the right questions? Perhaps the only question should be what is most Christ-like.

All this is bound to be an uncomfortable process. There are no easy answers. Some may worry that the world's agenda is taking over that of the church. Others will feel strongly that the central thing about Christianity, namely salvation in Christ, is being submerged in the public square by secondary issues. Refusing to retire into a holy huddle necessitates serious, creative engagement with core elements of our traditions, and a willingness to

move on from past perspectives and assumptions – cutting back, pruning, for the sake of new growth. It also needs a willingness to listen to one another, to endeavour to avoid yet more church dividing in an age when the vision of ecumenism is all the more imperative, and may be one of the most important fruits of being under pressure. Ecumenism requires engagement with past traditions in a spirit of repentance and listening. And it could be the most important thing we have to do: not create a monolithic united institution, but model a vision of human community which embraces in love different identities, histories, practices, beliefs, perspectives, as we truly become the body of Christ with many different but essential elements making it up.

Being Exiles or Resident Aliens

In 1990 a book appeared with the title *Resident Aliens*, subtitled *A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know Something Is Wrong*. Two American theologians challenged churches to reclaim the sense of being alien, of living as exiles or 'resident aliens' in a strange land. I quote:

> "Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people."
>
> "The Church exists today as resident aliens, an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief."[2]

The idea of finding the mentality of the exiles, able to embrace insecurity positively, fits well with the early history of the Church. The author of 1 Peter, writing in a time of persecution, addresses its readers as aliens and exiles. Christians may have been ethnically related to their pagan neighbours, but they'd become different – resident aliens, exiles. This consciousness was expanded in some of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, especially the *Epistle to Diognetus*. The author insists that Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind by country, speech or customs, yet, while conforming to everyone else in dress, food, mode of life, etc., they live as aliens, sharing in everything as citizens, and enduring everything as foreigners. They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but go far beyond them in their own lives – they love all but by all are persecuted; they are dishonoured but glorified in their dishonour, reviled yet they bless. Christians live as strangers, aliens and exiles on earth.

In the biblical material the resident alien reflected the true soul of the Israelite:

> You shall not wrong an alien or be hard on him; you were aliens yourselves in Egypt. (Exodus 22.21; cf. 23.9)

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[2] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony. A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know Something Is Wrong*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), pp. 24, 49, 51, 83.

One of the first commandments in Deuteronomy is to love the alien because God is no respecter of persons and loves the alien who lives among you. Jeremiah hints that God might be as an alien or stranger in the land. (14.8) The person who is different, the literal stranger, the 'other' is thus a sign of what Israel truly is, and as the prophet steps into that place he is also a sign of God's otherness, God's strangeness. Yet Jeremiah told the exiles to build houses and dig gardens in a foreign land. Even if the Church seems to be in exile in a post-Christian society, life goes on, and withdrawal into a ghetto mentality is not the biblical way. Being "in the world" but not "of the world" is a complex matter, but like the Christians described in the Epistle to Diognetus, it's surely the mentality we need to reclaim as the centuries of Christendom are left behind. The church has been too at home in the world.

Back in the days of the big X, a book on pastoral theology[3] appeared which took the remnant idea as its central focus. The idea was that a parish might be redeemed by the creation of a faithful core group, though this was not to be a holy huddle or exclusive élite, but the heart of the Body of Christ, pumping the blood of life to the whole body – leaven in the lump, salt savouring the whole through sacramental contagion. I guess this model might be reapplied to the role of the church in post-Christendom societies – a vicarious role, the role outlined at the time of exile by the Servant-songs found in the book of Isaiah, the role apparently claimed by Jesus Christ according to the Gospels, a role appropriate to those who claim to follow him.

[3] Martin Thornton, *Pastoral Theology: A Reconsideration* (SPCK, 1956)