

Our Annual Return from Exile

By Geoff Wood

There's a chapter in the novel *Moby Dick* in which the good ship Rachel approaches Captain Ahab's whaling ship in the mid-Pacific. Ahab, who is obsessed with finding and killing Moby Dick, calls out, *Hast thou seen the White Whale?* The Rachel's Captain Gardiner replies, *Aye, yesterday.* But Captain Gardiner's concern is not over the White Whale but over the disappearance of one of his whaleboats, among whose lost crew is his twelve year old son. *My boy, my own boy among them. For God's sake - I beg, I conjure. For eight-and-forty hours let me charter your ship-you must, oh, you must, and you shall do this thing.* But, as you know, Ahab had no time to help the Rachel find its missing boat as long as Moby Dick lay just over the horizon. And so the Rachel (named for the mother of Israel whose tribes were also lost among the nations) goes on her *halting course and . . . woful way . . . weeping for her children, because they were not.*

There's a similar poignant passage in the biblical book called *Baruch*. That book is all about a time when the Jewish people were brutally deported from their homeland, to be eventually scattered throughout the Middle East. And therein the author describes Jerusalem as a mother weeping over the disappearance of her children: *Hear, you neighbors of Zion! God has brought great mourning upon me, for I have seen the captivity brought upon my sons and daughters. With joy I fostered them; but with mourning and lament I let them go. Let no one be glad over me, a widow, bereft of many . . . They have led away this widow's cherished sons, have left me solitary, without daughters. Farewell, my children, farewell.*

A boy lost at sea; a sad father. God's people dispersed across the face of the earth; a sad mother. What relevance may they have for us at this season of the year? Well, in my case: much! Because every year, with each passing month, I find myself scattered here, there and everywhere. Here's a pressing deadline, there's the latest aggravating headline. Here's the monthly bills, there's the fence needing painting. Here's a ton of e-mail screaming to be answered, there's a book that's a month overdue. Here's a Nike logo and there's a Pepsi logo - and here's another phone call in the middle of dinner inquiring whether I'm ready to sell my house. Everywhere around me lies a totally secularized society, bereft of any sense of the sacred. By the time December rolls around, it's like I've spent my whole year in exile - been lost at sea, my mind disoriented, longing to find solace, a home among things that really matter - the meaning of my life.

And so, thank God, for the Christmas season - because every year, when things seem darkest, it awaits us like Jerusalem of old, like a mother expecting our return - ready to gather us within the warmth, the ambience of Christ's creche - where (home from exile at last) we may, like Mary, ponder things in our heart - reconnect with our ultimate source and destiny.

And so, let Baruch (in our first reading) indeed play the herald today saying: *Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery.* Let him alert mother Jerusalem to our homecoming at last, saying: *Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west. Led away on foot by their enemies they left you: but God will bring them back to you, borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.* Christmas has always been literally considered a time of homecoming. The Church would have us understand it to be a time of homecoming in the profoundest sense of the word.

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