

5-1-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Riegert, Eduard R. (1997) "During the Time of Your Exile," *Consensus*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol23/iss1/6>

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# During the Time of Your Exile <sup>1</sup>

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**Text: 1 Peter 1:17–23 (A—Easter 3)**

*Here's a word that describes our situation: Exile!*

“Live in reverent fear,” advises the writer of the Second Lesson, “during the time of your exile” (1:17).

“Exile” is a word that describes the way we feel about our communities, our country, and our world. We still live at the same addresses but we don't feel at home. Home has become alien. This is not the place or the society in which up until a short time ago we were living. We feel we have been wrenched away into another world that may look the same but isn't.

Nostalgia is a sign of our exile. Small towns have once again become desirable places to live because they are an escape from the “city”. *Forest Gump* and *Babe* are big hit movies because they picture simple life with a touch of ancient magic. Nostalgia for things past betrays our sense of exile.

The root of our sense of exile is a profound awareness of loss. Not only for Christians but for any socially alert person it is the loss of what some decades ago a Prime Minister called the “Just Society”, and what a former American President called “a kinder, gentler society”.

Since World War II that's what we deliberately and conscientiously set out to make in Canada. Post-World War II governments were haunted by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Not only the military veterans returning home but every waiting spouse and every depression-scarred child and grandparent feared deeply a return to Depression times, and insisted that

such times of human discard and hopelessness, homelessness and helplessness and hunger and unemployment and bankrupting illness would not fall on us again.

And so gradually—because the people insisted—we have been busy building, if not the Just Society, at least a juster society and a kindlier one. The Canadian Pension Commission in 1933; “Family Allowance”, the National Housing Act, the Veterans Charter, and basic labor laws in 1944–45; followed by the national hospital insurance in 1958 and full medicare in 1967<sup>2</sup>—to name only a few milestones.

So the sense of loss is profound, and engenders the feeling of exile. This is no longer the kind of society we worked so long to build. We’ve lost that. And we are hurt and bewildered. We are exiles in a strange land.

*How shall we as Christians understand this situation?*

Right off, it’s worthwhile reminding ourselves that Christians have always carried a sense of exile with them. The Letter to the Hebrews expresses it succinctly: those who “died in the faith...confessed they were strangers and foreigners on the earth” (11:13). Why? Because “they sought a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16). That’s the reason why Christians have always carried a sense of exile: This earth is not our true home. Christians think of themselves as peculiarly “God’s own people”—copying their Jewish antecedents even as First Peter says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (2:9). “Our citizenship,” affirms St. Paul bluntly, “is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20), and therefore we are resident aliens on earth. We nurse the image of paradise lost, and in our depths cherish the hope of paradise regained.

So if we hurt because we feel like aliens or exiles, this is surely a reminder to us that we have settled down too much in Babylon!

If Christians have always carried a sense of exile, it is nevertheless true that often exile has been literal for Christians: They have been forced out, pushed out, *by another god*. This is the experience of persecution.

Such was the case of the Christians in the Roman provinces in what is now Northern Turkey to whom First Peter is addressed. Pliny the governor was asking Christians to renounce

Christ...or else be executed. It was a simple examination. Three times he asked, "Are you Christian?" and three times threatened punishment if they were. If they were resolute in their confession, he sentenced them to execution. For him it was a simple matter. All they had to do to avoid execution was to recite a prayer to the gods which he dictated to them, make a small offering of wine and incense to the statue of the Roman Emperor, and curse Christ. This was a sure-fire method to expose Christians because he observed that "those who are really Christians cannot be made to do" these things.<sup>3</sup>

First Peter addresses them as "exiles of the Dispersion" (1:1), and encourages them not to "be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you" (4:12).<sup>4</sup> They are being pushed out by another god: "Just put a pinch of incense and a drop of wine in the fire to acknowledge Caesar and the gods of Rome. That's all you need do. Oh, and curse Christ, of course. That's all you need to do to stay at home."

But they refused, and chose exile.

So here we understand our situation bluntly: We are being pushed out by another god. A god who dictates constant down-sizing, monstrous layoffs, staggering cuts in education, social programs, and cultural programs, and dubious economic theories. This god is called *The Market*. We are a *Market-driven* society.

I know a young engineer who is working on contract with an Ontario branch of a major international beverage company. He literally hates the company. It's ruthless. Faceless people in some head office somewhere make decisions based on *The Market*. They give no sign of being aware of the people affected by decisions to shut down this plant, down-size that one, merge those, enlarge these. Morale is terrible. Everyone is anxious, suspicious, afraid.

The Market is a terrible god.

Our sense of exile is the experience of being pushed out by another god.

*But we are Easter People!*

Listen:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold,

but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

That's Good Friday and Easter! Notice: "You were ransomed." The better translation is "you were *delivered* from futile, useless ways of life *by an act of power!*"<sup>5</sup>

So we are not slaves to The Market god or any other god. We have been delivered by a mighty act of power! We are Easter people!

*So we can live in a new way.*

Trust in God who raised Jesus from the dead: Trust God who raises the dead! Is that hope? The Market god *kills*. The God who raised Jesus? Of course, gives *life!*

Have genuine mutual love. If anything crosses up The Market god, love surely does!

Obey a Lord who was destined Lord of Glory from the foundation of the earth. With that Lord we can resist The Market god.

As Easter people we can live in a new way.

We can make Easter in the world!

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This sermon was preached at a day-long symposium on ministry in the current social and political climate, "Weeping by the Waters," 9 May 1996, Waterloo, ON.
- <sup>2</sup> A highly readable history is *Victory 1945: Canadians From War To Peace* by Desmond Morton and J. L. Granatstein (Toronto: Harper-Collins, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> A. R. C. Leaney, *The Letters of Peter and Jude*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 9.
- <sup>4</sup> I am assuming that First Peter is late. Pliny's letter to Trajan is dated A.D. 112.
- <sup>5</sup> F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 2nd ed., rev. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958) 77.