

“I never thought I would see this in my lifetime.” How many people would be saying something like this, especially in Victoria at this difficult time. COVID-19 and government measures to prevent its spread have turned our lives upside down.

Some people have lost their jobs, others are struggling to pay their bills, people living alone and residents in nursing homes are isolated and schools are closed. We have experienced, and some of us are still experiencing massive dislocation in our lives.

The bible calls this experience “exile”. It means that we feel dislocated, isolated, and don’t belong — yet we are still living in our own land. We experience a kind of crisis of faith. I don’t mean that only in a religious way. True, for some people, what we are going through makes them question God: have we been forgotten or abandoned by God? But there is another crisis: we can’t have or do the things that gave us security and a feeling of wellbeing.

I mean things like the continuous availability of consumer goods, the freedom to go out when and wherever we wanted, to socialize and be entertained. There is also a crisis of faith in our institutions. Churches have lost credibility over the years, and now people are becoming disillusioned with government. We also have questions about the future. What will the “new normal” be like? Will I still have a job or a house? What about government debt?

The experience of exile in the bible did not mean the end of the Jewish people. Five or six hundred years before Jesus, their country was in ruins. It had been invaded, its infrastructure largely destroyed, and some of its people forced into slavery. They felt abandoned by God. It looked like the people and their homeland was finished and had no future. But they did find hope, and out of the wreckage, a new community appeared.

Their experience from so long ago can say something to us today. They looked back on their past and realised their faith in God was compromised, and it needed renewing. They came to believe that God was still with them during their time of crisis, and that gave them hope.

Our COVID-19 experience of exile also offers us a chance to review and rebuild our lives. It can help us realise that our consumer society can’t really satisfy the deepest longings in our hearts. We can start to realise more deeply that people are more important than possessions. We will want to build our lives on relationships — to love and be loved by family, friends, and by God.

*“The Lord says: Can a mother forget the child at her breast ... I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15).*