

REBUILDING THE RUINS

SEASON OF LENT | 2021

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WELCOME TO THIS YEAR'S LENT STUDIES

Jesus' life, death and resurrection powerfully demonstrate that the world can be changed. The chaotic destruction of self-interest and sin does not have to be the story of human society. The wonderful possibility for life to be better is something the ancient prophets in Israel preached passionately – enthusiastically denouncing the tyranny of the unjust and inspirationally casting a vision for a Godly way of life. Our human destiny is not to live in ruins but for the ruins to be rebuilt and for us to partner with God in this rebuilding. Because of Jesus, God's Anointed One, to which the prophets pointed, light and love, justice and peace can rule where lives respond to God's good news. Jesus is a worker of change in everyday lives. In Jesus, God was present in human flesh and those who follow him today are called into his building trade!

These 2021 Lenten Studies look squarely at the world we live in – a world in which injustice remains a feature, with unequal access to decent housing, the

need to embrace humanity across racial divides, stemming if not reversing creation's desecration and rebuilding God's church to reflect God's character. The unflinching look at the world of "ruins" in which we live is through the lens of the Old Testament prophets. The hope for "rebuilding the ruins" is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through reading, prayer, study, reflection and discussion, groups using these studies will be rightly provoked because God always wants us to participate in rebuilding. Observing from the sidelines is not an option for Christians! Merely "interpreting" the world around us through reading Scripture is insufficient. The point of Bible studies is to change the world.

- Bishop Peter Carrell, *Bishop of Christchurch*
- Bishop Eleanor Sanderson, *Assistant Bishop of Wellington*

INTRODUCTION

REBUILDING THE RUINS

We've chosen this Lent to base our studies around the writings of the Prophets.

The period they spoke and wrote in was full of uncertainty, chaos and upheaval. It spanned more than two centuries. Politically, Israel was regularly threatened by a succession of empires, eager to conquer and assimilate. It was also riddled by internal strife, which had led to it separating into two kingdoms after Solomon's reign – Israel to the north and Judah to the south.

However, the truth is that Israel had been coming apart at the seams for a long time. Apart from brief exceptions, God's people had repeatedly

failed to live up to their covenantal responsibility to be a light to the other nations. Idolatry of all kinds abounded. In the generations after King David, more and more land was concentrated into the hands of the few. The gap between rich and poor increased accordingly, and the powerful abused their position and status to the detriment of the majority, who were left to scratch out a living under the weight of oppressive practices and high taxes.

Clearly, this was not how God intended his covenant community to live. So Yahweh sent his prophets – people like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah. All attacked injustice in

uncompromising words. Some went to extreme lengths to communicate Yahweh's anger.

An important emphasis they made was that our relationship with God has significant social and economic implications. If we say we love God, this should be reflected in the way we treat others. Conversely, if we engage in acts of injustice and exploitation, our behaviour reflects a poor relationship with God, and our piety is worthless.

Yet, in spite of the repeated warnings, the leaders and people of wealth and influence refused to change their ways.

In 587BCE, a catastrophe of epic proportions struck the Jewish people. Jerusalem was sacked by the invading Babylonian army. The majestic temple, built by Solomon, was destroyed. The king and all those considered leaders and people of influence and skill were carted off to "exile" in Babylon.

The Exile was a major crisis for the Jews. The level of grief for what they had lost was immense. No wonder they cried out, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem." Their broken hearts were not just pining for their homes and land. They were thrown into disarray because they no longer knew how to be God's people in such an alien environment. Somewhat ironically, they felt abandoned by their God. They were deeply disoriented. When asked by their captors to sing songs, they replied, "But how can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a pagan land?" (Ps 137).

After several decades a new empire overwhelmed Judah's captors. The Persians swept in to take control. And as a result, some Jews were allowed to return to their homeland. This happened in several waves. What they returned to was devastating. Jerusalem and

its surrounds were in ruins – physically, economically, socially, and spiritually.

So where was God in all of this? The pivotal event of the Exile was really God’s judgement on an unfaithful people – and the inevitable consequence of failing to keep the Covenant. While their conquest and enslavement at the hands of the Babylonians and Persians was a political defeat, these invading armies were viewed by the Prophets as God’s agents.

However, judgement is never the last word of the Prophets. There is also the promise of deliverance and hope threaded through their messages. And the images they employ are able to fuel our imaginations as much as they did for the people who first heard them.

One metaphor used by several of the Prophets is the invitation and promise to “rebuild the ruins”. While much of this

speaks to the rebuilding and restoration of Jerusalem and Judah post-exile, it is also infused with the complete restoration God will ultimately bring to the whole earth.

So how might this connect with us and our world, two and a half millennia later?

We are fortunate in New Zealand that we do not live in a country that is under threat of invasion, famine, or civil war. Nevertheless, the shifts that have taken place during COVID-19 do not give us any reason to think that our political, economic, and social structures are any less vulnerable. Furthermore, the deep inequalities that have been growing in New Zealand for the last four decades have become even more apparent as the effects of COVID-19 are disproportionately felt by the poor and marginalised.

The threat of the virus has highlighted the “ruins” –

the cracks that run through the lives of those in our communities, churches and nation. As God's people in Aotearoa-NZ, we are invited to partner with God in rebuilding these ruins.

We want to explore four aspects of life where things are in disarray, far from what they once were and far from God's intention – housing for all, bicultural partnership, creation care, and the state of the Church.

So the core question we hope to grapple with through these studies is: "What might it mean to work with and for justice for our bi-cultural partners, for the environment, and for those struggling to find affordable, secure, dry and warm housing? What might working with each other and God to rebuild the ruins, look like?"

Come and join us in this exploration, as we seek to

listen and learn through the Prophets, what God might be saying to us and how God might be stirring us to action this Lenten season.

Grace and peace

– Wayne Kirkland

THANK YOU TO

Cassandra Burton-Wood

for her assistance in the early development of these studies.

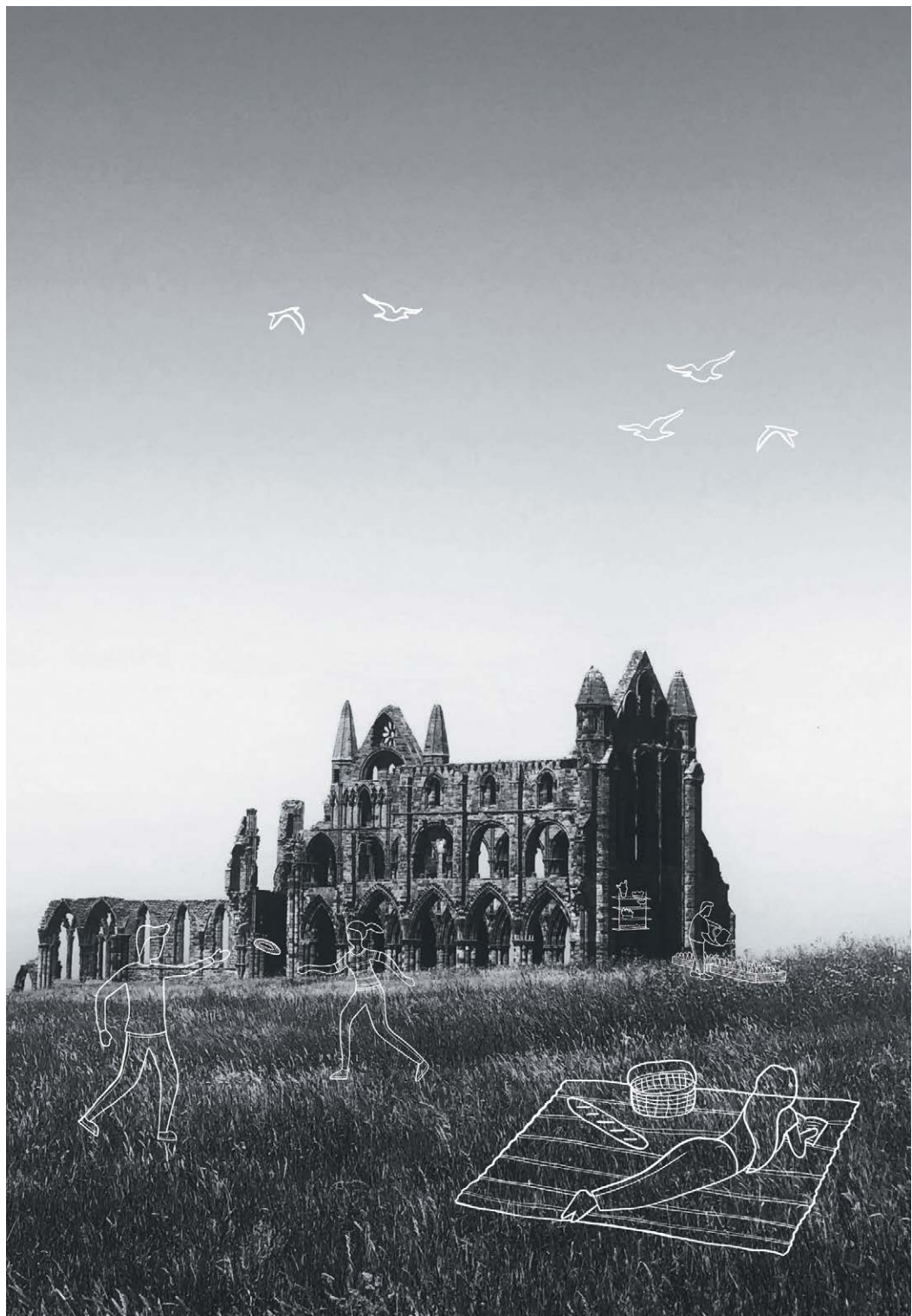
Jay Ruka for his helpful feedback on "Bicultural Ruins".

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A BRIEF NOTE ABOUT HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

These studies have a reasonably uniform structure. We begin each week with an opening story, followed by reading and reflection of a passage or two from the Prophets. The final section of each study is focussed on applying things to our own context. Each session has more questions than you will likely be able to engage with in the time available (75-90 min suggested). Our suggestion is that the facilitator pre-select the questions they think will most engage your group. As a rough guide, 15 minutes (max) is recommended for reading and sharing about the opening story, 40-45 minutes for the biblical section, and about 20-25 minutes for the final section.

These studies are an invitation to go deeper with others. As you plan your Lent groups, we strongly encourage you to pray into who you will invite to learn and grow alongside you this season. We also encourage you to share hospitality with one another, and finally, to join in with your local Chrism service together in Holy Week to finish your journey together.



ANCIENT RUINS

Bishop Ellie writes:

Although I grew up in Derbyshire, I was born in Whitby on the North Yorkshire coast. I feel a deep connection to its many layers of stories. I even wear it around my neck in my Bishop's pectoral cross, which contains Whitby jet, the dark black gemstone that the town is famous for.

Standing high on the headland above the town are the ruins of the Abbey – in its medieval

incarnation of a great building of worship in the Benedictine tradition. It was destroyed in 1540 under Henry VIII, like so many monastic foundations, as our own Protestant tradition took root. The ruins were then ravaged for centuries by erosion and icy wind off the North Sea, and hit by German naval strikes during World War I.

When I was a girl visiting Whitby on family holidays, we would make that iconic walk from the harbour town up the 199 steps to the Abbey,

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to look around the ruins and take in the glorious view. My family was not religious, but that walk was part of our tradition. It wasn't a pilgrimage to a religious place. But for me, even then, I felt my family's disconnect from God and my own longing for deeper relationship.

The Christian whakapapa of the site is traced back to the influential Anglo-Saxon double monastery (for both monks and nuns together), run by its Abbess, Hilda (c.614-680AD). It was part of a network of monasteries including the now more famous Lindisfarne, which grew across the kingdom of Northumbria and beyond as the gospel embedded in the British Isles and spread into Europe.

Hilda was Northumbrian royalty, born into a deeply

divided, tribal warrior society, which was slowly hearing the gospel through both missionaries sent from Rome, and from Celtic missionaries from Ireland. Baptised by the Roman missionary Bishop, Paulinus, in a mass baptism with other members of the royal family, Hilda became attracted to the monastic way of life.

She came to be influenced by the Irish monk, Aidan, who founded the Lindisfarne monastery. Aidan's Celtic tradition, with its emphasis on humility, poverty, creation, and living skin to skin with the suffering, contrasted with the Roman tradition which valued beautiful buildings of worship, structure, and obedience to church doctrine. Aidan's monks would give away any money immediately, sometimes

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using this to buy the release of slaves. In any place they would go, even if on retreat, they would seek out the person most in need to come alongside to care for. This was the tradition into which the royal Hilda chose to step.

Hilda's abbey would have consisted of 40-50 cells; timber with stone foundations. Women and men's cells were separated, but they shared a chapel for daily rhythms of prayer and worship. There was a school, and a scriptorium for producing books. They shared a common refectory for meals, with a great fire in the centre of the room. Further accommodation for those working the land in a plethora of trades surrounded the monastery. Talents and vocations were recognised and drawn out

from whoever God called. The cowherd Caedmon, with a gift of sharing the stories of God through poetry and song, joined the monastery at Hilda's invitation. However, he was a lay brother – so that he would not be required to undertake Latin and theological studies but could continue to compose the songs which spoke the good news of Christ to ordinary people who would never read but whose oral tradition had taught them to memorise thousands of lines of poetry.

Hilda's monastery became known as a place of excellence in learning, yet it looked very, very humble. There were no posh dwellings, yet it was frequently visited by royalty and the religious movers and shakers of the day, as well as the poor and needy.

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Most of what we know about Hilda comes from her near contemporary, the monk Bede, who noted that they followed the example of the early Church in Jerusalem, with no one either rich or in need, as all things were held in common.

Hilda was able to hold diversity in unity, without compromising what she believed and yet doing so in such a way that people from all walks of life and spectrums of belief called her ‘mother’. Such was the level of respect she was held in that she was asked in 664 to host a Synod which would settle an ongoing conflict between the Celtic and Roman traditions about the dating of Easter – something that was causing huge division in the church. Although she made her position clear, she retained the respect of those

on both sides of the argument, even when her own viewpoint did not win on the day.

Every place, every story has its light and its dark. By the 9th century, Viking raids had all but destroyed Hilda’s monastery. It would not be until after the Norman invasion of 1066 that the site was re-invigorated by Benedictine monks. The Benedictine tradition had beautiful origins, but became synonymous with exploitative wealth and male-dominated leadership. In the 19th century Whitby became famous again as the setting for Bram Stoker’s vampire novel *Dracula*, and today the town is filled with occult shops or sanitised vampire merchandise.

At face value you see little of Hilda’s story as you walk around today. There’s little

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remaining to speak of the vibrant life and mission that existed on this site for hundreds of years. But that's the thing about ruins. They can easily lead us to miss what they once contained. Sadly, Hilda's remarkable leadership in building such a dynamic community is lost to most of Whitby's visitors. And yet, for those who have ears to hear, the weathered stones of the Abbey are filled with stories of faithful followers of Jesus and the impact they had on their generations.

One final thing from Hilda - in her tradition, before any new site was created those involved would pray and fast for 40 days before they even put one stone on top of another. I have adopted this practice in our Diocese when any parish leader begins a new role – holding

them in prayer and fasting for 40 days as they seek to submit themselves to God's will for them in that place – for them to be able to see what is around them with God's eyes, including that which cannot be seen and that which shouts the loudest. What are the stories from our ruins that we need to learn, re-claim and re-tell about how God has worked in our land?

REFLECT

- 01 What impacted you most from Bishop Ellie's story – and that of Hilda's life?
- 02 Have you visited any significant sites of physical ruins? How did you react? What were the feelings you experienced?

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We've chosen to base these Lenten studies around the theme of “rebuilding the ruins”. Ruins speak of past vitality and life. They carry with them the echoes of past hopes and dreams. That's why they're such a powerful metaphor for thinking about the social, economic, psychological, and spiritual ruins of our lives. There is so much in our society, neighbourhoods, churches, and us in disrepair and decay, far from our hopes or God's intentions. The truth is that God can rebuild something beautiful and vibrant, from the very same rubble of our lives.

ACTIVITY

Briefly, speak out any “metaphorical ruins” you can identify in your own life, neighbourhood, church, or nation, in need of repair.

READING FROM THE PROPHETS

Read aloud Isaiah 58:1-12

Background: Isaiah is a book spoken and written over a period of two centuries. Only the first 39 chapters are thought to be authored by the prophet Isaiah. He lived in the eighth century BCE, during the time the Assyrian Empire was threatening Judah. Chapter 58 is written many, many years later and is part of “Third Isaiah”, authored by one or more “disciples” of Isaiah, during the years after the people have returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon.

QUESTIONS

- 01 What most impacted you when you heard these words? Why?
- 02 In spite of the trauma of many years of exile, followed by trying to rebuild back home, it appears they (particularly the leaders and those with power and wealth) have learnt little. What are they specifically accused of? (What are the ruins in their society?)
- 03 Why is their fasting ineffective in gaining God's attention and help?
- 04 In this passage, fasting from food is turned around and used metaphorically (i.e. "This is the kind of fast I want...") Read through verses 3-10 and mark out all the words/practices that GOD is exhorting the people to "fast" from. It may be helpful to speak them out.
- 05 How do you think powerful people heard these words from the prophet? What about those who had little?
- 06 This prophecy is a hard word. However, it also contains several extraordinary promises. Which ones stirred you? (Read it again if you need to.)
- 07 In verse 12 it says, "You will be known as a rebuilders of walls". What purpose did city walls play in contributing to the wellbeing of ancient cities like Jerusalem? What might this metaphor communicate to those who heard this?
- 08 This message speaks a lot about fasting. During Lent it is common to fast. If you can, share a time when you fasted and it enhanced your receptivity to hearing from God.

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Even though Isaiah 58 is written a century or more after the prophet Isaiah had initially challenged Judah about their idolatry and injustice, and warned them of God's impending judgement, it appears that the leaders and people of wealth were back to their old habits. The role of greed looms large in the sin of Jerusalem. When harvests were bad (i.e. during economic downturns) the powerful treated this as an opportunity to take advantage of those who were struggling - indebting them further. Though they were apparently very committed in their religious devotion, they were blind to matters of justice. Their fasting was accompanied by self-indulgence - a kind of "do-as-you-please" approach. This suggests that those who were powerful had

compartmentalized their faith – being genuinely devout in their public worship, but failing to let it affect their everyday life. The prophet's challenge was to live generously towards those who were struggling economically and not just accumulate more for themselves.

TAKE 2 !

Now read the chapter aloud again, this time from The Message:

“Shout! A full-throated shout! Hold nothing back - a trumpet-blast shout!

Tell my people what's wrong with their lives, face my family Jacob with their sins!

They're busy, busy, busy at worship, and love studying all about me.

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To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people – law-abiding, God-honouring.

They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?' and love having me on their side.

But they also complain, 'Why do we fast and you don't look our way? Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

"Well, here's why: The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit. You drive your employees much too hard. You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.

You fast, but you swing a mean fist.

"The kind of fasting you do won't get your prayers off the ground. Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after: a day to show off humility?

To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black? Do you call that fasting, a fast day that I, GOD, would like?

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts.

What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The GOD of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, GOD will answer. You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'

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“If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins, If you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go.

I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places – firm muscles, strong bones.

You’ll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry.

You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You’ll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community liveable again.”

QUESTIONS

- 01 In what ways might these words be particularly pertinent to our own current situation here in Aotearoa-NZ? What particular issues of injustice are you particularly concerned about? What restoration do you long for?
- 02 It's part of our human nature to more easily see sin in other people than ourselves. This is true for us as individuals, churches, cultures, and nations. However, none of us are immune from perpetuating injustice. Take some time in silent reflection, to allow God to bring to mind your own context - relationships, neighbourhood, church, workplace. Where might either your or other people's actions, inaction, or attitudes be oppressing others or allowing injustice to be perpetuated? (You may like to write down what you are recalling.)
- 03 If you were to take a title like "repairer of broken walls" and adapt it for your own work, home, or community context, what would it be/might be involved?

PRAYER

*As you finish, you may like
to read this poem by Walter
Bruggeman as a prayer:*

Exile

Like the ancients, we know
about ashes,
and smouldering ruins,
and collapse of dreams,
and loss of treasure,
and failed faith,
and dislocation,
and anxiety and anger,
and self-pity.
For we have watched the
certitudes and
entitlements
of our world evaporate.

Like the ancients, we are a
mix of perpetrators,
knowing that we have brought
this on
ourselves, and a
mix of victims,
assaulted by others
who rage against us.

Like the ancients, we weep in
honesty
at a world lost
and the dread silence of your
absence.

We know and keep busy in
denial,
but we know.

Like the ancients, we refuse the
ashes,
and watch for newness.
Like them, we ask,
“Can these bones live?”

Like the ancients, we ask,
“Is the hand of the Lord
shortened, that the Lord
cannot save?”

Like the ancients, we ask,
“Will you at this time restore
what was?”

And then we wait:
We wait through the crackling
of fire,
and the smash of buildings,

PRAYER

and the mounting body count,
and the failed fabric of
medicine and justice and
education.

We wait in a land of
strangeness,
but there we sing, songs of

sadness,
songs of absence,
belatedly songs of praise,
acts of hope,
gestures of Easter,
gifts you have yet to give.

THIS WEEK

To become the repairers of broken walls and restorers of street dwellings we first need to learn to pay attention to what has been laid to waste. At some point in the next week, take an hour and prayerfully walk about your neighbourhood, home, or workplace, perhaps with your camera. Ask God to help you to see where the ruins are (and if you would like, take photos that demonstrate or represent those ruins). Some physical ruins may be obvious but try to reflect on the unseen ruins too—the relational ruins, the spiritual ruins.

