I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord.

Perhaps because of lockdown I have been thinking about exile and how to cope with it. In September 1957 I had been seconded by my employers to a course in Manchester. I was excited and apprehensive in equal amounts and our curate reminded me of God’s words to Joshua, “Be strong and of a good courage, I will not fail you nor forsake you.” As I had been given a late vacancy I arrived at Central Station (now the Nightingale Hospital) at about 9.30 a.m., knowing nothing about the city and having nowhere to stay. As I walked along what I now know as Mount Street I saw “a little bit of heaven” (words of an Irish song) –IRELAND, the Irish Tourist Board office.

The young ladies found accommodation for me near Old Trafford cricket ground, at least I had somewhere to stay. On the first Sunday morning I went to church, asking different people where the nearest church was but no one knew. One man said that his kids went to Sunday School and it was over there somewhere. By the time I found it the service was in progress so I went to Evensong instead. The Vicar introduced me to a family with young people of my age, within a few weeks, having discovered I had been a choir member at home, I was asked to join the choir and I did not feel quite so much in exile.

In October I talked to a young lady at an Irish dance hall, married her 2 years later and felt almost Mancunian. I have just realised that although I have been living in England for over half a century I continue to support Ireland and Irish in sporting events so there must be a little exilic feeling in my mind. However, I still rejoice that as a lonely young man my first instinct was to go into the house of the Lord and everything else flowed from there.

**“You’re not singing any more”.** Football atmosphere is improved by the fans of each club singing through matches to support and encourage their team. It is something of a chicken and egg situation – which comes first, the singing helps the team to play well or the team helps the fans to keep singing. If team A is having a bad day and their fans are not singing for a time the fans of Team B taunt them by singing “You’re not singing any more”. That usually prompts a response challenging whether B team fans even turned up when their team was playing badly.

It is quite clear that the Babylonian people were taunting the Jews being led into exile: “Sing us a song of joy; one of the songs of Zion”. The Jews were not surprisingly so depressed at their situation that they were unable to sing the Lord’s songs in a strange land. Their reply appears very brutal but in effect they were saying that God will avenge what is being done and show you no mercy. When the Medes and Persians did overthrow the Babylonians and the Jews freed to return to Jerusalem their first task was to rebuild the Temple. Although it took some 16 years to complete it played a decisive part in Jesus’ ministry and we know that it was demolished about 70 A.D.

**Most scholars believe that John had been exiled to Patmos** by the Roman authorities and from there he wrote Revelations at about 95A.D. to the 7 churches in Asia who were experiencing great persecution from those same authorities. We remember that John had been a disciple of Jesus and had witnessed personally the importance of the Temple during that ministry and would have known of its destruction. Being well aware of its importance to the Jews he writes that he searched for a Temple but could not find one but them revealed that it was not necessary because “The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the Temple” and that God will be worshipped throughout the new Jerusalem and nothing can hinder us from being with him.

In a way this equates to our situation; we cannot go INTO church but thanks to John, Judith, Steph and modern technology the church comes to us. We are reassured that our worship is not restricted to inside those walls but we continue to walk in the light of the Lord.

But we do miss the fellowship and support that we receive being together and I am sure that I am not alone in feeling we will be glad when we can say “We will go into the House of the Lord.”