

Jerusalem: Then and Now
A Sermon Preached by Simon Butler

Readings: Psalm 122;

Revelation 21:9-27;

Luke 13:31-35

This is the last of the summer sermons with the theme chosen by a member of the congregation. Today's sermon has been chosen by someone with a particular interest in the Middle East. Sara is active in campaigning for the rights of Palestinians and needless to say the political, military and social realities of the conflict between Israel and Palestine weigh heavy on her heart. She has asked me to preach on the theme of *Jerusalem, Then & Now*, and kindly has given me the widest brief as to what to focus on.

So I've chosen three biblical texts which focus on Jerusalem and I'll say a few words about each in the context of both history and the present day and then I'll try and offer a brief reflection at the end that I hope will give us something to ponder and respond to.

Sue read to us Psalm 122. "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord." It's often sung as processions enter the church. This is because Psalm 122 is one of the Psalms of Ascent. It's a psalm that was used for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple, probably on great feast days. It's a psalm of joy and anticipation. Jews were invited to make pilgrimage to the Temple at certain times of the year and the Temple was, for

centuries until AD15, the centre of Jewish religious life. On the other side of the Jordan from Jerusalem, in the town of Madaba, there is an ancient mosaic map of the world in which Jerusalem stands at the centre of the world. Jews first, coming to the Temple to worship, Christians subsequently making pilgrimage to the holy places of the events of the life of Jesus (chiefly the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), and latterly Muslims, coming to one of the major holy sites of Islam, Jerusalem has stood as a centre of pilgrimage.

Some of us will have shared that joy and excitement of pilgrimage. The last time I went with a group from my previous parish, I vividly remember arriving in the city (on a coach admittedly, but our guide was reciting Psalm 122!) and, as we came through a tunnel and the Temple Mount and the Old City were laid out before us, our hearts leapt as we shared the excitement of pilgrimage and seeing this special place and simply being in the so-called Holy City. I also recall a moment in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, thought to be the site of the crucifixion, when at the shrine of the cross I watched a young Greek Orthodox monk approach the place where the cross is thought to have stood, tears streaming down his face as he connected powerfully not just with the holy place, but through it with the events of the death of Jesus itself. Jerusalem, then and now, a place of pilgrimage.

The second point to make begins with another story about the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As a site precious to all Christians, it's sad to realise that the place more often feels like something of a war zone between the Christian denominations, chiefly the Orthodox, Armenians and Roman Catholics. It is not uncommon for fist fights to break out during worship as one group of

worshippers are seen to infringe upon the rights of others. Some of you may know the story of the complex set of rules which govern access and worship in this Church. Such is the level of hostility and suspicion between Christians that the only person who is permitted to hold a key for the building is a Muslim. Somehow Jerusalem seems to become a focus of division rather than of unity.

Which of course, it has always been. The history of Jerusalem is a history of conflict and I recommend Simon Sebag Montefiore's excellent book on the city. From the moment of Jerusalem's founding when King David defeated the resident Jebusites, the city has been a place of warfare.

Today, of course, it is the conflict between the modern State of Israel and the Palestinian people that defines our knowledge of it. A poisonous combination of factors have caused this: the antisemitism of Christian Europe led to the rise of Zionism and a desire for a Jewish homeland; the Great Powers of the Nineteenth Century played out their politics in The region; the British Mandate of Palestine which lasted from 1920 to the founding of the State of Israel presided over an arbitrary division of the city that has embedded tensions that last to this day; and the combination of post-Holocaust compassion, Israeli and Palestinian terrorism (and we forget that Israel's founding was partly due to terrorist agitation) and the expulsion of huge numbers of Palestinians from the West Bank have cemented a dreadful stand-off which shows no sign of anything but becoming worse, and has become one of the driving causes of international Islamist terrorism. Perhaps nothing makes this clearer than the Wall (or Separation Barrier) that snakes through Jerusalem today. The journey of a few miles from the place of Jesus death to the place of his birth is now made near-intolerable by this vile structure that – for all the reasons and

arguments that have been deployed to justify it or condemn it – stands as a mute and threatening scar across the city. I vividly recall the last visit to Bethlehem and returning to Jerusalem after experiencing the Wall and its consequences. An enormous well of anger erupted within me: I can't recall ever having been made so angry by anything. Imagine then how those who have to travel through it or who live behind it must feel.

Jerusalem, then and now: focus of the world's conflict. The words of Jesus from our Gospel reading ring true still as he weeps over the city. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you." History and present reality combine in a sense of judgment upon humanity in Jerusalem, the centre of the world. Perhaps if we don't believe in the final judgment, we can see God's judgment work itself out in this place, as we face the consequences of our human actions. Jesus heartfelt prayer is this, "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, and you were not willing."

The third biblical reading, however, offers Jerusalem not as a focus of the world's conflict, and not as a place of pilgrimage, but as a vision of hope. It's not necessarily Jerusalem, then and now, but Jerusalem, now become New Jerusalem - then. The vision of Jerusalem at the end of the bible is one of harmony, as the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. It's a vision of hope for a world transformed. It was written for a church facing persecution at the end of the first century, the churches of Asia Minor, and it shows how far from the city, geographically distant, remains symbolically powerful to the early Christians of the Roman Empire. Revelation pictures the New Jerusalem –

an image of the triumph of Christian perseverance - coming down from heaven from God, it's walls are built on the faith of the apostles and seem vast and unimaginably rich; the Temple is no more because at the heart of the New Jerusalem sits the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and triumphant. Perhaps as such it is a vision of the end of religion, made meaningless by the presence of Jesus. It is a place of peace, of tribute and of utter goodness.

It would seem that, despite the conflict, Jerusalem remains a vision that God gives to his suffering people as a way of encouraging them to remain hopeful and faithful. The New Jerusalem offers us a social and political image to hold on to, to sustain us in our personal suffering and as a vision for us to work towards in the face of the world's conflicts. The New Jerusalem, future Jerusalem, offers a genuine encouragement to those who long to see a resolution of the sorrow of Jerusalem now.

And a final brief reflection: places are important for us. In the medieval church, our buildings built Jerusalem in every place: churches were built to model an imaginary spiritual journey to Jerusalem. West end chapels were called Galilee's just as the chancel of the church was spiritually Jerusalem. Embedded in our consciousness is the need for a sense of place. When we come to this place on a Sunday, it is a mini-pilgrimage to Golgotha and the empty tomb. But, Jerusalem then and now and then is both a warning and encouragement. It is a warning because, the moment we call something 'holy' or 'special' we risk turning something that is a gift into a source of conflict. Human beings, even redeemed humans it would seem, still want to fight and divide. When a place – this church, Jerusalem or even our homes become something to

defend or argue over – it seems Jesus would weep over us as he weeps still over Jerusalem.

But there is encouragement too, because Jerusalem stands as a place of pilgrimage, conflict and hope, because God has dwelt there, continues to draw people to it as a place of renewal, and allows it to be a vision of what we can be when our hearts are drawn to the purposes of God.

Christian faith can survive perfectly well without Jerusalem and without churches. But it cannot survive without men and women fired by the work of the Holy Spirit, united with Christ and pointing by our lives and words to God the Father. In as much Jerusalem, then and now, enables and sustains that, let us give thanks to God for it. For it is where the Saviour of the world lived, weeps and, in God's good time, will reign. Amen.