

Zion, City of our God

I wonder what the word %Jerusalem+ conjures up in your mind?
Perhaps Old Testament stories from Sunday School?
Or, from the New Testament, Jesus weeping over the city when he entered it
for the last time?
Or maybe its the Last Night of the Proms
or something you've recently seen on the News.

A month ago, the United States moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The date was May 14th, the 70th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel. Britain, France and Germany boycotted the opening ceremony, and there were riots in Gaza leading to the deaths of 59 Palestinians. So why is Jerusalem . the city of Zion - so significant? More widely, what are the religious and theological ideas behind what may be called Zionism . the call for a Jewish state . and what should Christians make of it?

Now you may say this is not something that you want to hear about from the pulpit, especially given that any discussion of such issues can be so clearly misunderstood, and, indeed, dismissed by some as anti-Semitism. But Zionism is an appropriate subject for a sermon for at least three reasons.

First, its been a major driver in what's happening in our world at this time. Christians have an inescapable commitment to Justice and Peace. Indeed, its a demand which we have inherited from Judaism, from the Law and the Prophets, and nowhere is that work more important than in Middle East today.

Second, Zionism is the basis of the creation of the State of Israel. We, the British, played an imperial, often duplicitous, and in the end cowardly role in that history, and today Christian Zionism is fundamental to how the United States relates to Israel.

Third, Christian theology cannot be understood without reference to the First People of God, the Jews. Nor our liturgy. Mattins includes a lot of Old Testament . we sang %was glad when they said unto me: We will go into the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand in thy gates: O Jerusalem+ (Psalm 122). And Jerusalem has been in all our hymns this morning.

Let me at the start make two clarifications, lest any of what follows is accidentally or even deliberately misunderstood. First, as regards the Jewish people, St Paul is very clear, as we heard from that closing section of Romans (11: 25-36) that the Jews were, and remain, God's special people. We know that the Christian Church has so often forgotten that, and we hang our heads in shame about how the Jews have been treated here in Europe, down the centuries and especially in the last one. But as St Paul says, the Jewish people continue to have a place in God's plan of salvation.

Second, the movements for solidarity with Palestinians which are supported by churches here do not dispute Israel's right to sovereignty and security. But, together with many people within Israel and beyond, together with many Jews, Christians and Muslims worldwide, we believe that Palestinians should enjoy those rights as well.

So what is Zionism? Zion is another name for Jerusalem, and Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people have the right to occupy the land, roughly between the Jordan (or even the Euphrates) and the Mediterranean, because God gave it to them when he made his covenant with Abraham. We read (Joshua 1: 1-11) how after the Exodus from Egypt and the death of Moses, Joshua led them back into the Promised Land. They gradually subdued the people already living there. Later King David moved the capital to Jerusalem and preparations began to build the Temple in the centre of the city.

For some Jewish people the creation of the State of Israel is a very religious matter, not least because they believe that when the Messiah comes it will happen in Jerusalem. Paradoxically some very conservative Jewish groups do not support the nation of Israel because they believe that this is trying to force God's hand: it must await the coming of the Messiah.

For others the emphasis is not on religious faith but on ethnic or racial identity. So today anyone of Jewish descent, whether a believer or not, has an automatic right to Israeli citizenship. But Palestinians or Arabs who have lived in what is now Israel for generations may apply but have no such right. Indeed hundreds of thousands were forced to flee their land when Israel was created seventy years ago and now live on the West Bank or in Gaza, or in the hundreds of refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East.

How then should Christians approach Zionism today? Maybe there are three choices:

The first is to say that the coming of Jesus Christ brought it to an end. He was the Messiah they expect, and he has fulfilled all the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. Christ himself is the new Temple. Jesus is the Lamb of God. And so on. God's Kingdom can no longer defined by ethnicity or by land, but is open to all, whether Jews or Gentiles.

This leads some Christians to question the State of Israel, and its here that the risk of anti-Semitism, or its accusation, is greatest. A more likely response is to ignore Israel and simply spiritualise+the Jewish inheritance. This is nowhere more apparent than with Jerusalem itself, which becomes a metaphor for inner peace, or for our heavenly home after death, or, thanks to William Blake, some idealistic utopia built amongst the dark satanic mills.

The second possible approach to Zionism is what has come to be known as Christian Zionism. It sees the longing for a Jewish homeland, and its eventual fulfilment in the State of Israel, as part of the unfolding of God's plan. The designers of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, including Lloyd George and Balfour himself, were, as evangelical Christians, great supporters of Zionism. In the United States today its estimated that over 40 million people, mainly conservative evangelicals, would call themselves Christian Zionists. Vice-President, Mike Pence, believes that supporting the State of Israel will expedite the Second Coming of Christ. Christian Zionists are a little quieter about what then follows, which might be that either the Jews are converted, or they go to Hell. The power of Christian Zionism in the States is why Obama waited until the dying days of his Administration before showing any real support for the Palestinians at the UN, and why Trump has now moved his Embassy to Jerusalem.

There is a third option, one that digs deeper into that Old Testament history and theology, now shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is rooted in the call of the prophets, as reinforced by the teaching of Jesus, that we should work together for justice and for peace. This path forward is shared by many Jews, Christians and Muslims, both within Israel/Palestine and beyond. It recognizes the right of Israel to exist, but it demands equal rights for the Palestinians. It calls for a two-state solution, with Jerusalem as somehow a shared capital. This is in theory the policy of the British Government, whilst

recognizing that the spread of Israel's illegal settlements, quite contrary to international law, makes that increasingly difficult on the ground.

But it goes deeper than that. It believes that alongside political change and the implementation of international law there needs to be reconciliation between people. Only when individuals and communities meet, and honestly share their fears and their pain, will there be a real possibility of peace.

And that means crossing boundaries. A friend of mine, an Israeli Jew, has spent his life, whenever he hears that Palestinian homes are being demolished to make way for new Israeli settlements, going and standing with the Palestinians, sometimes in front of the bull-dozer, simply to show solidarity. Bereaved Families Forum is a group of Israelis and Palestinians - Israeli parents whose child has been killed by Palestinian bomb, Palestinian parents whose child has been shot dead by an Israeli soldier . who come together to console each other, and to work for reconciliation.

Jerusalem means, literally, the city of peace, the place of shalom. In that sense, we should all be Zionists.