**Jerusalem – City of Peace?**

**Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday 14th July 2024**

**Preacher: Very Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Text: 2 Samuel 5: 1-10**

**Introduction**

Today, as a dreadful war rages in and around Israel, we look back to the establishment of Jerusalem as David’s city – David is confirmed as King of Israel and makes his base, his capital city, Jerusalem. This sermon seeks to look back, look at the present, and look forward in terms of this troubled city and the place of Israel in the history, present and future of the world. It has been for so long, and certainly is today, a pivotal place in human affairs.

Firstly, a disclaimer” this is complicated and confusing. I went ice-skating on Monday up at Staveley. As I paid my entrance fee, I was asked if I could skate? Of courses, I replied, thinking back to the days of my youth! Once I got on the ice, I realised how unfounded my confidence had been as I struggled for balance and risked broken limbs. And so, I had to humbly skate holding on to a chair! So it is with this sermon: whilst I would like to think I know a thing or two about Israel, its place in history and in current affairs, the more I looked into this, the more I realised I did not know! This topic lends itself more to a conversation than a sermon – so I will put out there my thoughts and invite engagement from you, the listeners.

Right at the start, can I say this story of Jerusalem and Israel is a story of mixed blessing, some good and happy times, and lots of bad and sad times. As I explore this it seems a good image is that of the theatre masks – one happy, one sad.

Let’s start with a happy mask

1. **A king and a capital**

In our passage, 2 Samuel 5: 1-10, David is confirmed as king of Israel and makes Jerusalem his base. There were good human and worldly reasons for this:

* David was one of the people he was to lead and related y marriage to the previous king, Saul.
* David had already proved himself as a leader of the nation.
* Jerusalem was a fortress that was safe, secure and easy to defend.
* Jerusalem stood halfway between the 2 kingdoms David was bringing together here – Judah, of which he had been king for 7 years, and Israel, of which he was now made king. The choice of Jerusalem gave him a neutral and central place to unit Judah and Israel.

*But* there was something more than worldly wisdom at work here - this, the Bible clearly tells us, was part of God’s big plan. Way back in the days of Abraham and Sarah, Yahweh had promised that they would be the ancestors of a people through whom God’s blessing would flow to all peoples and nations (Genesis 22:18) – there was the promise of a people and a land that would be the channel of God’s blessing to all the nations of the earth.

David and Jerusalem were key elements in the fulfilment of this promise.

* David, a king after God’s own heart, was chosen by God to be king. Jesus comes out of the lineage of David.
* Jerusalem means ‘city of peace’, certainly reflecting God’s desire for all nations to live in peace. And Mount Zion, within the city of Jerusalem, is the place where God is seen to dwell (Isaiah 8:18; Psalm 74:2) and Isaiah 2:2 predicts this.

*“In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains: it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.”*

Our reading from Psalm 48 today celebrates this:

*Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
    in the city of our God, his holy mountain.*

***2****Beautiful in its loftiness,
    the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
    the city of the Great King.****3****God is in her citadels;
    he has shown himself to be her fortress.*

So far, so good – the happy mask!

And, under David, things get even better …… David is able to establish a nation that is politically, spiritually, economically united and lead them into a time of peace, security and prosperity. And we have more in the bible about David than any other person excepting Jesus – the picture is of a man who models for us flawed human nature in redemptive, heartfelt and spiritually alive relationship with God!

Happiest of times!

1. **Continual conflict, oppression and displacement.**

However, there is in the midst of this story conflict and displacement. There is a piece of the scripture that is so hard to read that it is left out of the lectionary readings for the day:

***8****That day David said to his men, “Does anybody here hate the Jebusites as much as I do? Enough to kill them? Then go up through the water tunnel and attack those poor blind cripples.”* (2 Sam 5:8)

The fact is, Jerusalem was taken by force and the Jebusite residents were displaced. And more bad and sad times were on the horizon in the way of continual patterns of conflict, oppression and displacement!

By and large, David’s successors failed to honour God and unite the people – the prophets of Israel document continual unfaithfulness and consequent injustice in the land. Israel and Judah divide and then are conquered, the people are dispirited by experiences of exile and oppression as this corridor of trade called Israel is taken over by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans.

And them n 70AD, after an uprising against Roman rule, Jerusalem is taken and, along with its temple, largely destroyed and the Jewish people are displaced and dispersed to the ends of the earth.

In their new places of residence, this Jewish people, highly visible through their desire to keep separate, their clothing and custom, become targets for terrible and violent oppression through the centuries, this antisemitic feeling reaching its crescendo with the Nazi persecution of the Jews in World Ward II.

And in Palestine itself the conflict has been continuous between Arabs and Jews living there, especially since the mid-19th century when serios immigrations of Jews to Palestine began. Over the years, skirmishes have escalated to acts of terrorism and then to all-out war – as we have right now! It is hard to see any blessing to anyone in this!

1. **Times of renewal and return**

This big story that David and Jerusalem were a part of had some spectacular examples of renewal and return!

The people in slavery in Egypt escaped into the promised land led by a disgraced Prince of Egypt called by God, the inspirational leader Moses.

The Jews of Judah are freed from Babylonian captivity by the Persian king Cyrus and, under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, return to Jerusalem to rebuilt walls, temple, people and nation.

Then, in the 1800s, there was a growth in Jewish immigration back into the lands of ancient Israel and a growing Jewish desire for a homeland given the persecution being suffered. The world leaders came to see the need, and, on 14 May 1948, the United Nations declared the establishment of the State of Israel! That is an extraordinary story for peoples so long displaced and oppressed.

1. **God’s plan**

Is the state of Israel part of God’s big plan, a fulfilment of biblical prophecy, as were the Exodus and Return from exile?

This is where things get controversial and a little confusing. There are a number of competing ideas and theories here. Front and centre in this debate is the ideology of Zionism – from the mid-19th century there was a rising tide of ‘Zionism’ within Judaism and Christianity that believed it was God’s will for the Jews to return to Israel. For most of these people the modern state of Israel is seen as a fulfilment of prophecy and part of God’s big plan. But this feeling is not universal amongst Jews and Christians. The excellent novel “The Chosen” by Chiam Potok is set in New York in the 1940s and profiles a modern secular Jewish leader’s involvement in the fight for a state of Israel *and* an orthodox Jewish Rabbi who is adamant the return of Jews to Israel will only occur when the Messiah returns.

Within Christianity, there is a strong theological strain that sees the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy about Israel in Jesus. For example, they would argue that the vine was the most abiding symbol of ancient Israel, so when Jesus said “I am the true vine” he was claiming to be the new and true Israel. And events like Pentecost and the Pauline missionary movement demonstrate the way in which the blessings God predicted to Abraham flow out to all nations through the church. This is, in some circles, called replacement theology, the replacement of Israel with the church. I have seen it vehemently opposed by Zionist Christians who strongly believe the modern state of Israel fulfils biblical prophecy…. so, who is right?

I asked 2 of my respected Biblical scholar friends…. they said “I really don’t know!”

The idea that God wants to bless all nations and the way that comes to fruition in Jesus with his way and grace, mercy and love to all people, is appealing. If that were correct, then God’s heart is for all peoples, including Jews and Palestinians, and therefore against the violent excesses of both Hamas and Israel.

There is a story of Jesus at a local football derby between 2 fiercely competitive teams, think Manchester United and Manchester City in England, or Rangers and Celtic in Scotland. When Jesus turns up people were very keen to see who he supported. When the blue team scored a goal, Jesus cheered, clapped and threw his hat in the air with great enthusiasm. Aha! the crowd thought, now we know what side he is on! But then, 2 minutes later, when the read team scored, Jesus reacted with the same enthusiasm!? The crowd was baffled….. one brave fan for the blue team swaggered up to him and asked, “so, just who do you support Jesus?” to which he replied, “I support all people having a good time.”

1. **How will it end?**

Some, both secular and religious, have apocalyptic visions of the end of all this.

Others are hopeful in the way of Isaiah 51, predicting some kind of resurrection.

*I will show compassion to Jerusalem to all who live in her ruins.*

*Though her land is desert, I will make it a garden,*

*Like the gardens I planted in Eden.*

*Joy and gladness will be there, and songs of praise and thanks to me.*

*Listen to me, my people.*

*Listen to what I say:*

*I give my teachings to the nations;*

*My laws will bring them light.*

May this hopeful prophecy fill our prayers.

And maybe God will raise up another David, an inspiration figure of unity and peace, security and prosperity for this region? Think Joan of Arc, Ghandi, Churchill, Mandela and Tut, Merkel, Thunberg, Malala, Zelenski and Scott Robinson! Someone to inspire a break out from the cold and deadly tomb of hatred, conflict and despair! May this thought fill our prayers.

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Modern day Jerusalem itself with its rich cosmopolitan mix of race, culture and religion has

the potential to model wonderful unity in diversity. And we need to model that in our own city – it is such a shame that the 2 places of worship in Christchurch that are most security conscious are the Synagogue and the Mosque. But there are also wonderful example of cultural richness in our city! My wife Anne works with the Christchurch refugee community. When they are asked why they have made so many sacrifices to come to NZ they quickly say it is for their children. Surely, the elderly and the parents of Israel and Palestine desperately seek a better future for their children – a prayer we, too, can say amen to.