

A Sermon for Evensong, on the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany: 14th January 2018

Isaiah 60:9-22; Hebrews 6:17-7:10 - Jerusalem, the City of God

'... they shall call thee; The city of the Lord, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel... Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise.

This is all in a long passage in the third part of the Book of Isaiah - they say that there were really three prophets, whose work was grouped together under the name Isaiah - about the new Jerusalem, the return of the exiles from Babylon and what they had to look forward to. The first Isaiah, writing much earlier, dealt with the way that Israel had broken their covenant with God and followed other gods, which brought about their conquest and slavery by the Assyrians and then in Babylon. *'By the waters of Babylon | We sat down and wept'* [Ps 137].

Now God was going to give Israel a second chance. Jerusalem and the Promised Land, the land of Zion, would be treasured by the Lord, and its glory would shine out to all the world.

'The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious.'

There are so many things that I could say about Jerusalem. I've only been once so far, so my thoughts about today's Jerusalem are not very original or deeply grounded. Although - come to think of it - I might manage a more nuanced approach than the current President of the USA. But I want to suggest a few topics for further discussion and reflection, without in any way laying down any hard and fast dogmatic points.

I don't particularly want to talk just about Zionism today. I'm not sure that I would be able to add a lot to what you will already know, and to what you may already believe. Obviously, at this time of the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, it is fitting to mention that the nation of Israel now does have a secure home in the Promised Land. At the same time, we should be mindful that the Declaration mentioned the need not to harm the indigenous Palestinians. It actually said,

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of

existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I can't help feeling that President Trump hasn't helped the cause of promoting peace between Jews and Palestinians by his unilateral declaration that Jerusalem, rather than Tel Aviv, will be regarded as the capital of Israel from now on.

But the passage in chapters 60-65 of the Book of Isaiah, about the New Jerusalem, has a significance in the Bible not so much as a rallying cry for Zionists today, but as a vision of what the coming of the Messiah would entail. Just before, in Isaiah 59:20 it says, 'And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord.' And all this is what the Redeemer will do. The City of God has a spiritual, sacramental, significance, as well as being literally a city in the Middle East.

Don't worry - I'm not about to inflict a précis of St Augustine's solid tome called 'City of God' on you today. The thought that I wanted to explore was more along the lines of 'Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott' - a secure stronghold is our God. Home: a place of safety: a refuge.

I was thinking the other day that I have lived in Surrey for longer than I've lived anywhere else in my 66 years. I've lived here, mainly in Cobham, but with a five-year excursion to Esher, for 27 years - nearly half my life. Cobham is my home. But what does that mean, especially in the context of the prophet Isaiah?

The Israelites, coming to their new home, were exiles. They would not have recognised Babylon, where they'd been, for many years, as home. It was almost as if a prisoner, serving a life sentence, had said that his home was 'Pentonville'. I don't think he would.

But then the next issue is a possible conflict between those whose home somewhere has always been, and others who, for whatever reason, are incomers to that place. All other things being equal, should an incomer be equally entitled to live somewhere, equally with someone who was born and brought up there?

You might say, 'I was born here. I pay my taxes and contribute to society here'. But why does being born somewhere and paying taxes give you rights? Why should an incomer not also pay his taxes and be at home?

What happens if you become a refugee? There are often discussions about whether people are 'genuine refugees' or just 'economic migrants'. I wonder, though, whether the dividing line is quite so clear. If, say, I was a doctor in

Syria, but ISIS invaded my home town and I had to flee with my family, then as well as being homeless, and so needing to find another home, I would need some work. I would be an economic migrant as well.

But what about people who simply come from one country to another in order to seek better work, to make money? They are, indeed, economic migrants. But is that a bad thing? Why should where one is born and brought up determine where one ends up? What about the USA, whose wealth is derived in large part from economic migrants? For them the USA is really a place of which one could say, '... thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise.'

And come to think of it, Jesus and his disciples were 'of no fixed abode' for most of the time. Think of his sending out the twelve apostles: 'enquire who in [the town you go into] .. is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence. ... And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it... And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet.' (Matt. 10:11-14).

There isn't a simple answer. But it might be a good idea for us sometimes to reflect on Isaiah's prophecies, and just wonder where the City of God now is. Is it the City, or a City, of God? Is it 'Jerusalem the golden / with milk and honey blessed'? And how long do you need to have been there, if you want to stay? Does salvation and praise come into it? Time to think.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant