

2 Samuel 5:1 -5, 9 – 10

Psalm 48

2 Corinthians 12:2 - 10

Mark 6:1 -13

Zion: towards a theological appreciation of an image

The first reading continues the saga of David. It touches on his rise to power, his unification of the Israel and Judah, and the establishment of his seat of power in ‘the city of David’ as Jerusalem was known after he captured it from the Canaanites. David’s pathway to success was fraught with more problems than the reading tells us, but the message is clear: “*David became greater and greater,*” not because of his own strength or cleverness, but because “*the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him*”. Don’t take this as a human formula for a theology of success. It is a statement that gives credit to God who, in the freedom of divine sovereignty chose to put divine power to work through this man. We should not underestimate the significance of this for understanding David’s rise to power, and the exalted place the city of David came to have in the life and affections of Israel.

The words on the graphic refer to Jerusalem as a “beautiful/holy city”, a theme lavishly celebrated in Psalm 48, one of several known as “songs of Zion”. These days the image of Zion has become highly problematic and the site of Jerusalem is so conflicted and contested we may be tempted to ask whether it any longer deserves to be described as beautiful or holy. And yet in the biblical tradition the imagery generated by the concept of Zion is significant and grappling with it may provide us with help in dealing with the difficulties of distinguishing between Zionism and Jerusalem as an earthly reflection of the City of God.

Israel’s expectations of Jerusalem were very different from those the Greeks applied to their cities. For Greeks, cities were a symbol of human potential and progress in human history, the benchmark for the best in civilization. Cities provided a context in which humans could realize their destiny as complete, free and responsible beings. While Israel knew of the decay that could be associated with city life, as we ourselves do, Jerusalem was spoken of in terms that ring with poetic hyperbole: “*highly praised, fair and lifted high, the joy of all the earth.*” Jerusalem achieved its status, not because of its physical strengths, or even from David’s prowess in capturing it from the Canaanites. Jerusalem was holy for theological reasons: it was the place of the Temple, a concrete witness to God’s eternal covenant with the people of earth. Jerusalem was known as beautiful and holy because it was home to the strong and tangible sign of God’s choice to be our companion in history. But while the prophets affirmed that Jerusalem was “established forever” (Amos 1:2, Isaiah 2:2-4, Micah 4:1-3) they also made it clear God was always free to withdraw, especially if the people misused the sign of God’s presence. Jeremiah (Ch 7) soundly chastised the people for relying on the Temple as a talisman that would protect them against attack or suffering regardless of their commitment to God, or their ethical behaviour towards their neighbours. There was a danger in making the Temple into God, rather than seeing it as a sign of God’s meaning for the world.

The poetic hyperbole of Psalm 48 contains irony that needs to be unpacked. Although David struggled to capture Jerusalem, in reality it was not an outstanding site. It was a small regional centre, the hill on which it stood was not especially high, and its ramparts were not so vast they would have caused panic to invading armies as the Psalm suggests. But because “the God of hosts was with David”, and Jerusalem was “his” city it accrued multiple levels of meaning that took on transcendent reference points. The poetry of the Grail version of the Psalm gives an added edge to the second half of the first stanza:

*Mount Zion, true pole of the earth,
the Great King's city!
God, in the midst of its citadels,
has shown himself its stronghold.*

A commonplace town on a hill is the centre of the world and the stronghold of God, and has within it an overwhelming sense of inner strength, not derived from military might, that transcends the limits and powers of earth.

The scene where the kings of earth assembled and were dismayed and shattered may reflect an event in 701 BC when Sennacharib's army, which had surrounded Jerusalem, suddenly and unexpectedly withdrew. In Psalm 48 the assembled kings represent the earthly powers over against God. Yet they are dumbfounded by what they see and flee in terror, as full of anguish as a woman in travail. Their disruption was “*as when the ships of Tarshish were shattered*”. Tarshish - an ancient name for Spain represents the uttermost parts of the earth from which the strongest ships came, built to travel the greatest distances. In the encounter between divine presence and the most superior of earthly powers and technology what is earthly is totally routed. God does not triumph through earthly power. God's power is made known in weakness.

The poetry of the Psalm moves beyond the material to offer a transcendent, end time image. Jerusalem becomes a symbol for the eternal presence of God. That God has “*established [Jerusalem] forever*” is less about the perpetual endurance of the city itself and more an indicator of the ultimate endurance of God's sovereign loving-kindness in the world. This theme causes rejoicing that gathers in the humble from nearby, and spreads to the ends of the earth: “*As with your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth....Let mount Zion rejoice and the daughters of Judah be glad..*”

In the last stanza the Psalmist calls for a holy procession around Zion. It is a bit like a grand, colourful celebration going around the church. But this meditation on the ramparts and citadels of Jerusalem is focussed on the splendour and wonder of God within, whose power made known in weakness is not constrained by anything we know. The hardest thing is to keep the focus on the sign of God-for-us, without it becoming “for our purposes and advantage”.

Jesus adds another layer of meaning to Jerusalem. He is the greater Son of David whose life was lifted up to become the sign of God's covenant with us. He chastised Jerusalem for making the house of prayer a market place and, as a hen seeks to gather its chicks, longed to gather the holy city to God but it refused the gift of his presence. He was a prophet without honour amongst his own. The powers of Jerusalem came together to make an end of him, and his own followers fled the scene like the armies of Sennacharib. But God's power was made known in weakness.

In conversation with the woman at the well Jesus said the day would come when people would no longer worship on mount Zion: they would worship in Spirit and truth. With Jesus there is no earthly city. The "high place" becomes fellowship in the community of his body, which at the Resurrection is given as the sign that despite the worst we can do, God's sovereign, merciful love and power continues with us in the world. This redefines the presence of God for us. Christians are no longer attached to a place. They are attached to a person who stands at the centre of a worldwide community of faith that is the living sign of the presence of God-with-us. As Bonhoeffer said: the church is the secret centre of the world because in Christ the deeper meaning of God for the world has been expressed, showing us what holy love and holy living look like. This calls into question even the sacred site of Jerusalem. With this as the yardstick for the faith and values to which we are called, if Jerusalem is meant to be "God's place": the city where the deepest peace is meant to be expressed and merciful love creates a truly inclusive faith community that manifests God's blessing to the world, then what Jerusalem has become is profound challenge to all people of faith. The only hope will come through deep repentance that causes us to turn again and live in the power made known in weakness. Only so will it be possible for people of faith to truly show what it means to carry the promises of God in the world.
