

Lent 2
21/2/2016

Mark the Evangelist

1 Chronicles 11:1-9

Psalm 27

Hebrews 12:14-19, 22-24

Luke 13:31-35

Jesus pities Jerusalem

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Chris Mostert

Theme ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ (Luke 13:34)

[A] Introduction

In biblical imagery the cock and the hen symbolise very different things. It was a cock that crowed three times, marking Peter’s threefold denial that he knew Jesus. In today’s reading from Luke Jesus speaks about himself with the simile of a hen gathering her brood under her wings. ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.’

The readings today focus on Jerusalem, sometimes referred to as Zion or the city of God. David captured the city of Jebus (of the Jebusites) and made it his fortress. The Epistle directs our attention to the *heavenly* Jerusalem, Mt Zion, the city of the living God (Heb 12:22). This is an eschatological reality, essentially something future, which has – in a strange interplay of tenses – already touched the present. Today, however, prompted by Jesus’ words over Jerusalem, our focus will be on Jerusalem *past* and *present*.

[B] The *Dominus flevit* chapel

There is a poignant reminder of Jesus’ words in a little chapel on the Mount of Olives, called the *Dominus flevit* chapel: in the place where ‘the Lord wept’ (cf Lk 19:41). From there you get a great view of the Old City of Jerusalem, including the great Mosque of the Dome which stands on the site of the great Temple, destroyed in the year 70 AD. The little chapel was built in the 1950s but from the 5th century there had been a monastery on the site. Inside the chapel there is a mosaic of a hen, with a halo around its head. Its wings are spread out, and underneath them there are five or six little chicks.

Ever since the 9th chapter of Luke’s Gospel Jesus has been on the way to Jerusalem. It’s the turning-point of the book, for the decisive things will happen in Jerusalem, the place that would make or break a prophet. He doesn’t actually get to Jerusalem till late in the 19th chapter, when he is welcomed as a king, though riding on a colt. But now, at the end of ch 13, Jesus speaks with pathos about Jerusalem and its people. His words are a kind of *lament*: words of sorrow or grief. ‘If only you had recognised the things that make for peace.’ Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers. Jerusalem is the city where his own mission must take him and where the people’s verdict will be given. There’s no avoiding it!

[C] Jerusalem – the lamented city

Jerusalem is the city that stands for Judaism. For around 3,000 years Jerusalem has been a holy city for Jews. David's son, Solomon, built the first great temple there. Jerusalem and Judaism go together, by divine fiat, as religious Jews see it.

The public relations material that promotes Jerusalem doesn't tell you that it is a city that symbolises the competing aspirations – religious and political – of Jews *and* Arabs, and that neither side will countenance forfeiting these in any future political settlement.

There have always been Jews in Jerusalem, even after the Romans put an end to Israel as a political entity in 135 AD. For 18 centuries Jews lived mostly in *diaspora* – until 1948, when the state of Israel was restored. In no time it found itself at war with its Arab neighbours, who have been none too friendly in the decades since. • *Why would the Jews surrender Jerusalem again?*

There have also been Arabs in Jerusalem for most of that time, the people of Palestine, who lived under the so-called 'protection' of successive world empires. It was the Arabs who had to 'make room' for the new state in 1948. A mass exodus and refugee camps for thousands of Palestinians later, Jerusalem remains a holy city for *Muslims* too (though it has to be remembered that not all Arabs are Muslim: there are also *Christian* Arabs.) The temple mount is the sanctuary from which Mohammed is believed to have made the Night Journey to the throne of God. • *Why would the Arabs give up Jerusalem?*

For Christians Jerusalem is also a city of special significance. It includes many places associated with the life (and death) of Jesus. Pilgrims have always gone to Jerusalem. Christians have continued to live in Jerusalem, though now only in very small numbers. The Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries, when Christian rulers gained (and then lost) control of Jerusalem, were not the end of Western attempts to gain political control over Jerusalem. It's not without reason that Muslims reject the West for its expansionism and its injustice. Christianity is still seen as religion of the West. And Jerusalem is the point of *meeting* – and of *division* – of the three great monotheistic religions.

[D] The peace of Jerusalem

The author of Psalm 122 urges people to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem'. 'Peace be within your walls and security within your towers.' But Jerusalem is *not* the city of peace it longs to be. It hasn't known much peace, and the leadership of both the Jewish and Arab people don't inspire much confidence that it will soon become a city of peace.

Yitzhak Rabin, not long before he was assassinated (in 1995), looked for a city 'where the Jewish priestly blessing mingles with the call of the Muslim muezzins and the bells of Christian churches'. He looked for 'tolerance between religions, love between peoples, and understanding between the nations'. But it remains true, as Jesus said long ago, that Jerusalem does not know what makes for its peace.

It is not the fault of Jerusalem alone! There are many whose sense of one injustice after another or whose fear of terrorism or spiral of violence makes them resolutely hostile and closed to the possibility of peaceful co-existence. And if the complex political forces of the region were not difficult enough, the rhetoric of the militant wing of Islam and of some prominent people in the West further creates a climate that makes co-existence and shared responsibility for Jerusalem a very distant prospect indeed. Meanwhile, the Psalms – shared by Christians and Jews – bid them 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem'.

[E] Jesus' compassion over Jerusalem

The writers of the Gospels know, as they tell the story, what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem. The *welcome* he received when he came to the city turned to *hostility*, resulting in his death. Why did he go to Jerusalem or stay there once he got there? He tells those who come to warn him about Herod's plan to kill him that he'll go in his own good time! He's busy; he has many things to do. He is healing people. He is 'casting out demons', that is, doing battle with the powers that destroy and dehumanise life, that break down health and wellbeing and communion with a loving God.

Jesus is among them, enacting the love and mercy of God. He restores people to their community; he brings personal wholeness and reconciliation; he brings light to people's darkness. He embodies for people the solidarity of God with all who are weak and vulnerable. He longs to protect them, as a hen gathers her chicks and shelters them under her wings.

This is a very tender image. Nature provides many examples of the protective care of a mother for her young. It's striking that Jesus should express his love for people, individually and collectively, in an image such as this. He does not love people – the poor, the suffering, the exploited – in the abstract, impersonally, in general. He feels for them, longs for their wellbeing, their safety, in a personal way. That is how he thinks of them, feels for them, relates to them. It is no different today! Jesus does not speak to us, address us, as a figure from 2,000 years back but as one who is present and active among us *now*.

Of course, Jesus is not only gentle and tender. He is also strong: in his opposition to evil and exploitation and self-centredness. The image of a 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', as an old bed-time prayer has it, is at best one-sided and at worst a serious distortion. But love and compassion can be the basis of both tenderness *and* fearless strength.

But, as we see especially in Lent, the period leading up to the Passion, Jesus is a realist! He does not live in a fantasy-world. He knows that Jerusalem will bring a show-down. He will be tempted to stay away or escape from the opposition and the pain. But will it be worse for him than it is for Jerusalem? Eventually, it too will suffer; it will lose its identity and its power. Its temple will be destroyed, as he predicted. Most serious of all, it will not be the city of peace that it longs to be! If only it had known what makes for its peace. If only it knew so now!

[F] Conclusion

In this season of Lent the church throughout the world follows – actually, *accompanies* – Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. He will come to its people 'in the name of the Lord', as at first they perceive. But they will forget who he is, what he says to them and what he does among them. The last word will be one of condemnation: 'Crucify him!'

In his name *Christians* have made war, and still justify war, the real motivation being only thinly disguised! But he is proclaimed as the one who brings peace between Jew and Gentile, between one party, one nation, and the other. He goes to Jerusalem in peace; he longs for peace for its children and for the inhabitants of all cities, no less now than then. He longs for peace for Jerusalem, for the whole region, for the whole world.

May God grant us to share this longing; and to pray, and strive and advocate for the peace of Jerusalem; for peace between Jews, Christians and Muslims everywhere.

Thanks be to God, for giving us, in Christ, the way of peace.
