

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 10 | 25.08.2019**

Isaiah 58: 9b-14; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13: 10-17

**In our hymns and in particular in the psalms, we get constant references to Zion. And of course it is there in our reading from Hebrews today too. But where is it and what does it mean? And what connection does it have with one of the big political issues of our day?**

**But first, the origins of the word Zion. For those of you familiar with King David and the events of his reign a thousand years before Jesus, you will remember that it was he who brought the Ark of the Covenant which contained the Ten Commandments out of the desert and its endlessly temporary resting places under tents, to a new fixed stone Temple on one of the ridges in the Hinnom Valley fed by two fresh water springs. This was hugely expanded under his son Solomon and he and King Hezekiah later built huge fortifications to protect it from invasion.**

**And in those early years there developed a whole library of theological poetry about Zion: Zion, the Holy hill, Zion the ‘footstool’ for Yahweh; it was Zion that was somehow the closest point on earth to heaven. Here God had set his seal and made his home. Grander still, Zion was – on earth – the mirror of his kingdom in the heavenly realms. And because God was there, and because the people of Zion were his chosen people, the city was unconquerable, inviolable. Israel, with their capital Jerusalem and the Ark housed on the Temple Mount, was to be the guarantee of God’s sovereign rule and abiding love of his people - for ever. Zion: God’s home. It was the place of annual pilgrimage, the centre of the world in maps right up until the Renaissance.**

**Sadly for the Jewish the tiny state of Israel came under almost constant attack from its neighbours, and in 597BC it was overrun by the Babylonians and the people were taken into exile.**

**Psalm 137 gives us a flavour of the grief of the exiled Jews in Persia: *By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and remembered Zion. There we hung up our harps. When our captors demanded, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion’, we said to them. How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?***

**Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks all overran Jerusalem and it was not until after Herod the Great had rebuilt Jerusalem and the Second Temple about 31BC that the mythical status of Jerusalem and of Zion the sacred mountain began to have any physical substance again and building went on for another ninety years. But it was short lived. After the Jewish rebellions against the Romans, the whole city was destroyed bar three huge towers and fragments of the wall Herod's Second Temple – known the world over as the Wailing Wall.**

**And the Jews themselves? They of course were dispersed all over the world, caught up in larger empires and especially the European wars. The image of the wandering Jews, subject to persecution and annihilation is nothing new. Even here in Britain we have the story of the massacre of the Jews in York in 1190.**

**The story I alluded to earlier of one of Daniel Radcliffe's family, told in a recent episode of *Who do you think you are?* is very telling. A great uncle of Daniel's had been a London jeweler before the second world war but not a particularly successful one. He was known to be losing money when he called the police to say that his office had been robbed and a huge amount of jewelry was stolen. In due course he put in an insurance claim but it was rejected. The insurance company did not believe his story that it was theft: they thought it was a put -up job to cover his debt. And the evidence? *Well, he was Jewish wasn't he?* So ashamed was Daniel's uncle that, despite having a loving wife and children he took his own life. It took seven years to prove that the theft was for real. Hatton Gardens is barely a mile from here and that was the kind of antisemitism that was rife – and within living memory.**

**That, of course is as nothing to the treatment of Jews throughout Europe: in Spain, in Russia and finally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. The involvement of the Jewish community in commerce, in banking and especially in money lending (Shakespeare gives us a view of that in *Shylock*, the mercenary Jews in a *Merchant of Venice*) made Jews out to be 'not one of us'.**

**So the roots of antisemitism go hand in hand with the dispersal of the Jewish community for almost two thousand years. Still they recite the words of Psalm 137: *how can we sing the Lord's songs in a strange land? More graphically, how can we be at peace in places where people hate us?***

**And yet the idea of restoring Zion, Jerusalem, a Jewish state has been fraught with as many difficulties throughout these years of the dispersion. The Balfour agreement of 1917, coming out of the mess of the First World War when Britain was given Palestine to administer, would have given the Jewish community the right to return to Zion, to Jerusalem and to the area we know as Palestine. But what about the Palestinians already living there? It took a guerrilla war against the British in 1948 led by David Ben Gurion, and another anti Arab war in 1967 to establish what we now know as the State of Israel.**

**And for many Jews, they would say those wars were necessary to restore what is rightfully theirs. They point to all those verses in Isaiah which talk about returning to Zion: this is their rightful fulfillment. God's people must have a home once more.**

**But is it true to the idea of God's home on earth – 'Jeru-salem', the city of peace, a place of justice especially for the poor? How can the so-called security wall which divides Jewish settlements on the west bank from Palestinian cities like Bethlehem – be anything more than yet more occupation, the forceful domination of the weaker Arab Palestinians by the might of the Israeli army?**

**I have no doubt that there is a lingering antisemitism in much of the British population – and it isn't by any means just to be found in the Labour party although that is where the debate has been strongest. There is a long standing support by Left Wing politicians for the Palestinian peoples and their rights to the land which they have lived in for two thousand years.**

**Even those who are really not political ask why it is that such a tiny proportion of our population – Jews number only a quarter of a million and have less than 500 synagogues - should be so influential in education, the law, in the media and – yes - banking and commerce. They are also an aging population and two thirds of their votes apparently go the Conservative party. Orthodox Jews are seen to be detached from the rest of society, living in their own areas like Stamford Hill and Barnet.**

**But that isn't the Jewishness of Daniel Radcliffe. Nor should these historical accidents and sources of conflict be relevant now as we, as Christians, try to think about the Biblical ideal of Zion.**

**Because the symbolism of Zion, representing physically, God's constant care for his people, seems to be a really helpful one. The fact that the three great faiths based on the faith of Abraham - Judaism, Christianity and Islam – see Jerusalem as one of their great centres of pilgrimage should surely be the opportunity to express all that unites not divides us.**

**The tragedy is that the idea of Zion as the place of meeting with God has become tribal, a particular hot-bed of in-fighting about land as well as about faith. It makes the crisis in Jerusalem – and the increase in antisemitism and religious intolerance of every sort, all the more painful.**

**Because what we are all seeking is the notion of a home, a resting place, a place where we can be ourselves and share hospitality with others. The idea of Zion has less to do with the restoration of a political Jewish homeland than the establishment of a God centred oasis where the Creator God is worshipped and listened to ... whatever our cultural background. The ideal of Zion is for Orthodox and Liberal Jews; Zion is for Catholics and Protestants; Zion is for Shia and Sufi Muslims; Zion is the natural place for dialogue, acceptance and genuine love.**

**And in that sense we are all Zionists – and can make Zion wherever we are. While we long for the day when Jerusalem become a place of genuine peace, we give thanks for all those places where reconciliation is talking place – in Taize, in Corrymeela and in St Ethelburga's chapel of reconciliation here in London.**

**And in our local churches – and in our refusal to allow differences of political or religious belief to allow us – for an instant – to dismiss anyone by their labels – stupid Jews, French, Americans – or whatever. The notion of Zion is the gold standard for peace. It was the attempt to lay the stone for an everlasting testimony to love and hope – for all peoples, not just for Jews.**

**As we sing about Holy Zion, we are asking God for the chance to recreate that level of trust and hope that once was built in Jerusalem, knowing that the price of making this kind of peace is always through the death and the resurrection of Jesus who, you will remember, died in Jerusalem, not so far from the Temple Mount as the abiding gift that God is with us.**