As most of you know, my main job is as a professor at the London School of Economics working on religious conflict and the interfaith relations we need to address them. I try to have a clear distinction in my mind between the lecture podium and the pulpit. Students don’t want a sermon and you don’t want a lecture. But sometimes it feels like there ought to be more cross-over, particularly in these times when religion is more entangled than ever in serious global conflicts that impact us all.

And I feel that this morning because what Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel reading remains probably the most intractable source of global conflict today. It is in the background of so many of the headlines we have seen over the last few months. To cut right to the chase, the place where Jesus is standing, in the heart of Jerusalem, is now the site of the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. Hamas called their attack on Israel on 7th October the Al-Aqsa flood. The event is mostly interpreted in the West as driven by the aspiration for Palestinian statehood but that is more the objective of the ailing Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Now, more religiously motivated groups have come to the fore on both sides of the conflict, and the temple mount in Jerusalem, where Jesus stands in this passage, is central to both their visions.

So forgive me if this morning’s sermon is a bit of a lecture, but we will think about how we respond to all this as Christians towards the end.

To begin we need to go back to the beginning. The very beginning. Some believe that Mount Moriah in Jerusalem was the site of the Garden of Eden. We might want to interpret that more mythologically. But there is perhaps more reason to embrace the wider held belief that this was the mountain to which Abraham took his son Isaac as a sacrifice. God reveal that he does not desire human sacrifice and a lamb is substituted. So this place becomes the place of sacrifice to God.

The descendants of Abraham leave this region and become enslaved in Egypt. Moses encounters the Lord at the burning bush and leads the Israelites on a 40-year journey back to this Promised Land. On the way he receives the commandments which we heard in our first reading. They are famously carved into stone tablets which are carried by the Israelites in a box known as the Ark of the Covenant.

Around 3000 years ago, this wandering people are given a king, David, who completes their conquest of Judea and takes Jerusalem to be its capital city. The Ark of the Covenant is brought to rest on Mount Moriah and becomes the spiritual centre of this nation. David’s son Solomon builds a temple to house the ark and within it, animals are sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people.

That temple was then destroyed and rebuilt after the Babylonian exile so the temple that Jesus is looking at in this story is called the Second Temple. Jesus’s criticism of it is essentially that it has become too mechanistic. Pilgrims have come from all over to make their sacrifices so people are changing money into the temple currency so that they can buy the animals to sacrifice. It has become a sort of atonement factory that is insufficiently spiritual.

By the time the gospels are written down, a great crisis has occurred. In AD70 the Romans destroyed the temple along with most of Jerusalem. This is devastating for the Jewish people. Their place of encounter with God, the Holy of Holies, has been destroyed. And it is a decisive moment in the split between Jews and Christians and the future of both religions.

Mainstream Judaism replaces the temple with the rituals of synagogue and home, and a new focus on scriptural interpretation – Rabbinical Judaism. Those Jews who break away, say instead that there is a new Temple, available to all people Jews and Gentiles, wherever they may be. And that temple is the resurrected and ascended body of Jesus Christ.

*“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body.*

Many centuries pass. The Jewish people scatter. The Christians spread East and West but particularly grow in Europe after the Emperor Constantine converts to the faith. But Jerusalem remains mostly derelict. That is until the followers of a new religion, Islam, seeking to show their connection with the prophets of the past, come to Jerusalem and build there a mosque. They call it Al-Aqsa which means “furthest” because of the position of Jerusalem in relation to the Arab peninsula. They believe that Muhammad was spiritually transported there on a Night Journey which is recorded in the Qur’an. Originally, Muslims did not pray towards Mecca, they prayer towards Jerusalem. For the 13 centuries that followed Jerusalem was predominantly a Muslim city, with of course the ugly complexity of the Crusades when the Al-Aqsa mosque was briefly turned into a church.

But everything changed of course with the creation of the modern state of Israel after the Second World War and the devastation of the Holocaust. The earliest Zionist settlers began praying at the Western Wall of their temple that had been destroyed in AD70, but even in 1967 they did not attempt to take control of the Temple Mount, the Al-Aqsa compound, which remains under Jordanian control. But in recent years more extreme Jews have been going up there, praying and talking about the building of a third temple, which would of course destroy Al-Aqsa and push the Muslims out of their third holiest site.

Negotiators at the Camp David summit describe their surprise that Arab control of Al-Aqsa was Yasser Arafat’s absolute non-negotiable. On this he said he was answerable, not just to the Palestinians, but to 1.5 billion Muslims.

You may remember that in 2022 Ramadan and Passover coincided and there were violent clashes between Jewish extremists and Muslims in the Old City and significant damage was done to the Al-Aqsa mosque. That was when Hamas began to plan the Al-Aqsa flood. And that brings our story up to date.

So what should we, as Christians, take from all this? I want to suggest three things.

First, as people of faith I think we should have some awareness of where other faith communities are coming from and recognise that these aren’t just political disagreements; this conflict in particular connects with deeply held beliefs which we should respect and understand, even if we profoundly disagree.

Second, we should avoid the Christian arrogance and ignorance of history which views this as a conflict between Muslims and Jews, and we are somehow better because we’re not involved. We should advocate for Christians in the Holy Land who are squeezed on both sides, but we should also recognise that the Christian history of the region, particularly the Crusades, has probably been among the most violent.

But finally, as we watch the news and make up our own minds about what’s going on, I think we should hold in view our distinctively Christian perspective. Jesus Christ, as the new temple, gives us a moral and social vision that extends, unlike Judaism, to all nations and all peoples, but which, unlike Islam, is very reticent to take any fixed political form. We are called to be agents of a Kingdom of justice and peace, ever building new relationships of love that constitute the New Jerusalem.