

Sermon for 17th May Fifth Sunday of Easter Evensong

Readings

Zechariah 8.1-13

¹The word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying: ²Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. ³Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. ⁵And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. ⁶Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts? ⁷Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; ⁸and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

⁹ Thus says the Lord of hosts: Let your hands be strong—you that have recently been hearing these words from the mouths of the prophets who were present when the foundation was laid for the rebuilding of the temple, the house of the Lord of hosts. ¹⁰For before those days there were no wages for people or for animals, nor was there any safety from the foe for those who went out or came in, and I set them all against one another. ¹¹But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, says the Lord of hosts. ¹²For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. ¹³Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.

Revelation 21.22-22.5

²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

An address by Revd Fiona Brampton

Both our readings tonight are of exile, of not feeling comfortable in surroundings, and perhaps speak to us today.

Zechariah was writing when a remnant of the people returned from 70 years captivity in Babylon. He came from a priestly family, so was both priest and prophet

The people who returned were facing a 'new normal', after years of 'life on hold'. In fact, life in Babylon, life in exile, was not on hold, and many stayed in that Eastern part of the world because that is where their life had developed. The stories we have in the Bible of that time are stories of faithfulness in the face of fear and difficulty – but it's clear that the fear wasn't always the predominant feeling (Esther, Daniel, Tobit...)

King Cyrus sent the Hebrews back to their own lands. Other conquering leaders send their subjected people to completely different lands, mixing up the slaves from different parts of the Empire. Cyrus seemed to think that he'd get more out of the people if they were in their own lands.

Going back wasn't easy. There was resistance from those whose families had not been taken captive, so they stayed in Jerusalem, but they'd had to make compromises with their neighbours, including the Samaritans. They'd found a way of living that worked, but might not have been completely 'faithful' in accordance to certain readings of the law.

Those who returned came back with their stories and dreams of what life would be like but instead found the Jerusalem Temple destroyed, the city walls broken, the law forgotten. Ezra and Nehemiah embarked on a rebuilding programme, but it wasn't the 'glorious' return everyone had hoped for.

Zechariah's prophecies talk of a God who loves his people, who forgives them, cares for them. They also look towards the Messiah God will send.

Today's prophecy sees the restoration of Jerusalem as a place of hope, of faithfulness, of joy 'the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.' God's peace – shalom, with plenty for everyone - and the people as a blessing, will reign. The reading ends with the words 'Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.'

NT reading was written towards the end of the first century, at a great time of persecution. John (is this John the apostle or another John? – actually it doesn't matter for our purposes today, so won't go there) had seen many of the leaders of church die for their faith. John himself should have been killed, but it failed, so he was exiled to Patmos. He was living in a cave with the harbour beneath him and the twin temples to Greek gods above him.

It was in this place that he was given that vision that we read in Revelation. It starts with the letters to the 7 churches, calling them back to the passion of their faith. It goes on to have those visions of destruction and evil upon world – and the triumph of the Lamb (of Jesus) that we know.

And the book ends with the passage we had today. This is a passage that is often used at funerals. It's a story of restoration, renewal and recreation, in the city of God – not the broken Jerusalem on earth, but the City of God, with light, beauty and healing at its heart. – and each of those who are there find their ultimate purpose, their true vocation in eternal worship.

There are three messages I want to pick out

A) Both passages speak into our immediate situation. We feel exiled. People have plans of what they will do when we get back to normal but the world will be different. It may be different only for a short term but it certainly won't be 'business as normal. Maybe you saw pictures of people in a coffee shop in Germany wearing hats made out of swimming noodles to give them the 2 meter distance, or the restaurant in Amsterdam serving customers in 'greenhouses'; our schools will be without all the toys and things that children are used to helping them learn; we'll probably all be in facemasks.

It maybe that we've learned from this experience, and are ready for a different world, a world of God's love for one another and for the earth – although, in the rush to get back to 'normal' that seems a bit like a dream.

Zechariah wrote of 'The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets - how we would love to see that once more, without fear.

Maybe we can experience peace – God's shalom, where 'the widow, the orphan and the stranger' are cared for. Don't be afraid, but let your hands be strong.

B) Following the meditation, on 'I am the gate', I had an email conversation with one person who said 'the problem with getting old is the gate to the past is much easier to negotiate than the gate to the future – maybe because there doesn't seem to be much future, particularly at the moment'. John was probably in this place as well. He'd had a long life, much of it in Christ's service, and death lay ahead – either of old age or more violently.

There was a stark message from a doctor early on in the course of corona virus, calling on us all to sort out our final wishes- about funerals and wills, but also to think about the type of death we want, how much intervention we wanted. Apparently, people, or certain people, would get a letter about this – I don't know if people did – I haven't heard anything.

Many, many years ago, I remember Cliff Richard (speaking of his faith) saying he wasn't afraid of death, but the dying bit did frighten him (this when he was so young, you couldn't imagine it would ever happen to him).

One of the most difficult things about being a priest – or a family member at the moment – is that you can't hold someone's hand as they're negotiating that time. We can only be there from a distance.

But perhaps this time has given us all a breath, a chance for each of us to consider both the city of God, our final destination and also to make sure that others know of our wishes in the journey there (because our ultimate purpose is eternal worship, Nicole has insisted that the last piece of music to be played at my funeral is 'Heigh ho, heigh ho, it's off to work we go', from Snow White and the 7 dwarves!).

C) It's important to remember, though, that Kingdom, prophesied by Zechariah, seen by John – doesn't start some time in the future. That's why John's vision has those urgent messages for the church of the day – the Kingdom of God, the time of the Messiah – is now. It's not when we get to heaven, or even when we get out of lockdown. It's now. It's about God's shalom, God's peace for all and it's about each of us working for that now – God's peace – where people have enough to eat, where the widow, the orphan and the foreigner are welcomed and able to live and thrive (these three were the most vulnerable of the community, so their thriving was the marker of shalom). It's where God's people are a blessing and a light to the world around. Because God loves us, and forgives us, and wants the best for us, we respond with love and forgiveness and wanting the best for everyone, including our most vulnerable.

Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.