

## Sermon for Seventh Sunday of Easter

12 May 2013

Preached by Fr John W Stewart at St George's Malvern

It's a very challenging thing to be a pilgrim in Jerusalem. It requires attention to every part of one's self. All the senses are escalated – from smelling the spices in the market, to hearing all the languages of the human family, to seeing lay upon layer of history in the stones of the buildings. It requires accepting that most of what goes on will be beyond understanding. The place where three major religious traditions have their sacred sites is also the place where the worst of religious fervor breaks out in violence. Its long history is one of successive waves of destruction and occupation.

And yet, it is compelling and irresistible at the same time. This crazy circus of a place draws the pilgrim into its holiness, its vision of what life might be, its striving for peace, its yearning to be free of its tragic past.

Photos cannot capture very much of this. Nor can journalists or writers. But our hearts just might.

This is a place where every grain of sand has someone's blood on it. Where people live in fear of their neighbor. Where everyone claims the land to be theirs. This is the very place where, it is recorded, Jesus looked out from the Mount of Olives and wept. He said *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused.* (Matt 23.37) Nothing's changed really and Jesus would have much the same reaction standing on that spot today. God offers life, and humans choose death. God's only command is that we live in love and we have not learned how to. God's history is that we can be set free from all that enslaves us, that terrifies us, shames us – but we don't accept or even believe it's possible. I find myself praying ever more desperately for the peace of Jerusalem, and trying to imagine what that might look like.

And then I crash into the extraordinary passages of scripture for this Sunday. They critique this thinking and despair and they offer a way forward which is beyond our imagination.

Let me start with the second reading, from the last chapter of the last book of the NT. (Revelation 22.12-22) This is the vision of a new Jerusalem. Not the historical city in Israel but a vision of what is yet to be fulfilled. Jerusalem is the only place which exists on earth and also in the eternal mind of God. This is the heavenly Jerusalem where all the people of God will ultimately find their home. In John's view the new Jerusalem is the fulfillment of all human dreams for the community and security of life in an ideal city. This is the place where God dwells with all people, and God himself is the temple. Do read all of chapters 21 and 22 when you get home. It holds such a vision out to us as we struggle with our current human condition. In this new city there are elements of the origins of creation, but God continues to make all things new. God fulfills all human efforts to build a decent earthly

civilization. This is a vast, inclusive city not for the chosen few but for all the peoples of earth. The tree of life is in the midst for the healing of the nations. In today's portion there is the loud call to everyone to COME. What a vision when it is laid alongside the reality and horror of so many places of our world.

Then in the Gospel passage we eavesdrop on Jesus' prayer as he waits in the Garden of Gethsemane. (John 17.20-26) He will soon be on trial, crucified and buried. And his only prayer with that looming is for the unity of humanity. He prays to God, *may they all be one as we are one*. (John 17.22). He Jesus the Christ has come to such a generosity of heart and surrender to the work of God that this is his prayer. We now, the Body of Christ, are challenged on this day, to make this our prayer too. *May all be one*. May all Christians be one, may all the members of this parish community be one, may all the members of my family be one, may all the citizens of this nation be one, may all human beings be one. That is what we have been created for and what we must be praying for and striving for. As the implications of that sink in, we see things rather differently.

The first reading is one episode recorded about Paul as the implications of Jesus' resurrection were sinking in to him and his companions. (Acts 16.16-34) Paul's healing of a disturbed slave girl enraged the authorities and Paul and Silas were imprisoned. During the night an earthquake disturbed the prison and set them free. An earthquake had already set the slave girl free, just as an earthquake had earlier announced Jesus being set free from death. Whatever this literally means, we can be sure that its message is that when God is at work things are going to be disturbed, upended, freed.

No human violence will have the final word. No human despair or loss of hope will prevail. The love of God which prevails in the resurrection of Jesus will also prevail in Jerusalem and the ends of the earth.

Starting with us.