

Trinity 19 2023 – The Conflict in the Holy Land

Amos 8 11: *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.*

Isaiah 25 vv 1-9 p708, Philippians 4 vv 1-9 p1180, Matthew 22 vv 1-14 p990

I am bound today to speak about the conflict in the Holy Land, but what can I say? I will not dwell on the horrors and the suffering. We are all too aware of what's going on. We feel what we feel & we express our feelings in prayer. *Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*

I could talk about the history. It's a long history. The Gaza Strip is pretty much where the Philistines lived in biblical times. Gaza is Gath where the giant Goliath came from. So, there's been fighting in that region for the worst part of three thousand years. Askelon was a Philistine City and, two thousand years later, it played an important part in the Crusades. Perhaps we need to go back as far as Abraham and his two sons – Ishmael from whom the Arabs claim descent and his younger half brother Isaac, the father of Israel. Isaac, the child of the promise, Israel the Promised Land, we'll come back to. Millennia of bloodshed in the part of the world in which so many of the wonderful things we read about in the Bible took place, the land in which the Word of God was proclaimed by His faithful servants, the very soil on which the Son of God performed His signs, taught us how we ought to live, suffered and died and rose again for our salvation, bear terrible witness to the obduracy of our humanity, our deafness to the Word of God, the blindness of our vision, the hardness of human hearts. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, said Jesus just days before His Crucifixion, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!* If Jerusalem refused to obey the Word of God when He stood before them in human form, what hope is there for the rest of the human race ever?

About a hundred years after Jesus ascended into Heaven, a guy known as Bar Kokhba (Son of a Star) led a second major revolt against the Romans. The first rebellion in AD 66 resulted in the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD70. The cult, the priesthood and the temple rituals and sacrifices ceased. Judaism focused on the reading of the Law, its interpretation and obedience to its requirements. When the Jews revolted again under Bar Kokhba, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, renamed the city Hierapolis and expelled the Jews from what was left of it.

By and large, the Jewish people left the Holy Land and, as many of their ancestors had done in previous times of military conflict and trouble, settled in other lands – where, only too often, they faced hatred and persecution. Their land was repopulated by the Arabs and eventually became part of the Ottoman Empire.

A major factor in the tensions in the Middle East is the fact that Canaan / Israel / Palestine is the Promised Land – the land which, God promised Abraham, would be the inheritance of Abraham's seed for ever, that Isaac was the child of God's promise and that Isaac's descendants through Jacob (to whom God gave the name Israel) were the chosen people. When the Jews were looking for a homeland in the period between the two world wars, some in the British government suggested Uganda. That could never, however, have been a serious possibility. Despite the fact that most Jews had not lived in Israel for more than a

millennium and a half, the emotional bond between the descendants of Israel and the land named after him was too strong to be broken.

Most Christians believe that God's promise to Abraham regarding his seed dwelling in the land for ever was a first step, a stage in the process. The Old Testament was always meant to be fulfilled in the New. The Promised Land, in the eternal dispensation, is not the Land of Canaan, but the Kingdom of Heaven. The chosen people are not only those who are of the flesh of Isaac, those who share his DNA, but all those *of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues* – Jews and Gentiles alike – who come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, Who is both a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel.

Some Christians do believe, however, that God's promise to Abraham about his physical descendants dwelling in the land of Canaan forever is still valid and some Christians even believe that Christ will not *come again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead* until the Jews have returned to Israel.

Following the destruction of the Temple and their diaspora, their dispersion in gentile lands, most Jews settled in their new homes, tried to keep the Law and maintain their identity, and regarded the return of the Jews to Palestine as a dream effectively to be discounted as unlikely to be realised in their own lifetimes or those of their children.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, more than 1700 years after their ancestors' expulsion from Jerusalem, Jews particularly in Russia and eastern Europe began to think of returning to Zion and establishing their own state there. This, they believed, was their religious and political destiny. Israel would be a refuge from the pogroms and persecutions Jews too often experienced in Europe and Asia. The numbers of those returning increased during the twentieth century. After World War I, the British had a mandate to govern Palestine and failed to find a solution which would be fair to both Jew and Arab. The Nazi Holocaust resulted in an unstoppable wave of Jews seeking to create a state in the Holy Land, a permanent refuge from persecution. Who could deny them that after what they, as a people, had endured? The State of Israel was established in 1948.

With determination and grit, with enthusiasm and the skills and technologies which they brought from Europe, the new Israelis achieved wonders in transforming the land and improving its productivity. Some people saw a fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 35: *The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the LORD, and the excellency of our God.*

But what of the Arabs, the Palestinians who already lived in the Land of Promise? Of course, they mainly resented being displaced and ruled by the Israelis. They fought back and generally lost. Hundreds of thousands became refugees, dwelling in squalid camps. There have been terrible atrocities on both sides.

I'm not going to go into whose fault it all is and why so far there has been no agreement capable of producing a just and peaceful solution. Each side blames the other and they both have a point.

Some Jews believe that the whole land of Israel should belong to them and Jewish settlers continually encroach on Arab land. Many Arabs, both in Palestine and in other middle-eastern countries believe that the State of Israel has no right to exist and would like to see it destroyed. Most Israelis believe that it is their right and their duty to defend the State of Israel by whatever means necessary. There are, however, some Orthodox Jews who believe that there should be no secular state of Israel based on military might, but that rather, they should have waited for God to bring the Jews home in His own good time.

I'm not going to talk about the politics. I'm not a professional politician and those who are politicians have not so far succeeded in bringing peace with justice. I'm not going to talk about military strategy, about which I know very little. It's for the generals and commanders to decide how to achieve legitimate war aims with minimum loss of life and damage to property.

I'm not even going to talk about the ethics of the conflict, though the ethics of conducting a just war is very much a subject for Christian consideration. I'm not going into the ethics of warfare or its morality at this point, however, because I am very aware of how difficult it is to apply the principles laid down in times of peace in churches and colleges, in the counsels of state, and adopted as supposedly binding international agreements, when men and women are fighting bloody battles for the very continued existence of their own people.

What I am going to talk about today – very briefly after that long introduction – is Amos' prophecy with which I began this sermon: *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.* When I realized that I had to preach this sermon on the situation in the Holy Land and how difficult it is to know what to say in the face of these apparently intractable issues, I asked myself what is the LORD saying to us? After all, that is my job as a preacher – to proclaim the Word of the LORD. You don't need to know my political views or my personal strategy for ending the conflict. I'm happy to share what I know of the history and the religious background in the hope that it helps us all to understand, but you're not here to listen to me; you're here to hear the Word of God and the task of the preacher is to help you to work out what God's Word is to us today in this situation.

I find myself at a loss. I don't know what God is saying to us today about the conflict in the Holy Land or about so much else. There are so many intractable matters on the agenda nowadays, so much we don't understand, so many difficulties about which we do not know what to do – problems facing both Church and state to which we cannot seem to find the solutions, issues facing the world which are beyond our comprehension. What is God saying to us in all these situations? Where is the Word of the LORD for us today?

In Amos' time, people are warned that a famine of hearing the words of the LORD is on the way. Why is that? It is because they haven't been listening to God. They've worshipped

idols. They've been insincere in their worship of the one true God. They've been greedy and selfish and disregarded the needs of the poor. They've been dishonest. They've adopted a *get rich quick* mentality such that material gain is all that truly matters to them. They have for so long turned a deaf ear to the Word of God that very shortly He is going to cease speaking to them.

It's not hard to see the parallels with our world today – indifference to the truth, even hostility to the very notion of absolute truth, greed, materialism, dishonesty, violence, tremendous inequalities between rich and poor, an obsession with money. We shan't hear the Word of God unless we listen. To hear the Word of God is to obey. We need to repent. The world has to repent. The Church must repent. We need to read our Bibles, to pray, to seek God's Word and His grace in order that we may act on what He is saying to us. Otherwise we face *a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD* and that would be the ultimate catastrophe.