

Promised Land?

Epiphany 4 Year A

Isaiah 9v 1 – 9; Matthew 4 v 12 - 23

Leicester Cathedral – 27th January 2008

There is a Jewish joke which goes as follows:

A child at the end of class in the Hebrew school asks the rabbi:

The children of Israel they crossed the Red Sea?

They did, said the rabbi

The children of Israel they defeated the Philistines?

They did, said the rabbi

The children of Israel, they were taken to Babylon?

They were, said the rabbi

The children of Israel, they returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt to temple?

They did, said the rabbi

So rabbi: what were the grownups doing?

Today's scripture readings have as their underpinnings what theologians label salvation history, and what we might call theological geography.

Zebulun and Naphtali appear in Isaiah and then in the gospel. Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the twelve tribes of Israel settled in the land promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But the settlements were never secure. The verses from Isaiah hint that the land of promise wasn't necessarily the land of peace. These were the northern territories, subject to invasion, and eventually to conquest, its people subject to oppression and deportation. And the situation at the time of Jesus was similarly insecure: the region around Galilee was under close Roman control, still disputed territory, where God's promise of land seemed only partially fulfilled. This was where, Matthew tells us, Jesus withdrew after John's arrest. Not to a place of stability and security, but to a place of conflict. And he went to live not in the thriving town of Tiberias, but in Capernaum, a small impoverished settlement. Jesus was not choosing the safe or easy option, and Matthew has an interesting definition of withdrawal. Not least because he tells us Jesus is immediately out there in public, proclaiming the kingdom, calling disciples and curing diseases of every kind.

There are a couple of things we can infer from the thinking in Isaiah and Matthew.

The first is that place is important. God promised his people a land because people need land. They need space to secure their well-being and dignity.

The second is that God's kingdom and land are not the same thing. Jesus did not go into the northern territories proclaiming liberation from Roman imperial power, demanding the return of his homeland. Rather he proclaimed the gospel of repentance, and he cured every disease.

In other words, physical geography, place and territory is significant for human flourishing. But spiritual geography, in the sense of the maps created for the soul, is more significant.

Theological geography has suddenly become a hot topic. Earlier this month the Bishop of Rochester Michael Nazir Ali published a short piece in the Sunday Telegraph¹ which began:

'In fewer than 50 years, Britain has changed from being a society with an acknowledged Christian basis to one which is increasingly described by politicians and the media as 'multifaith'. He gave the reasons for this as immigration, the loss of Christian nerve, the ghettoisation of our cities and the growth of Islamic extremism creating as he put it: *'no go areas where those of a different faith or race may find it difficult to live or work because of hostility to them and even the risk of violence'*. He urged a return to a more overtly Christian culture, and criticised the loss of Christian chaplaincies in our major institutions, and the amplification of the Adhan, call to prayer.

Concurrently Christians in Oxford began a campaign to prevent the new local mosque broadcasting its call to prayer².

A sermon allows me little more than an outline response, but some response is, I believe, necessary, in this city of faiths with new mosques and, I sense, a similar anxiety about no go areas and the loss of Christian identity.

Firstly it is important to note, and Bishop Michael does not, that the ghettoisation of cities, the parallel developments of communities, is not something new. Working in 1970's Liverpool on the boundary between Catholic and Protestant territory, I was powerfully aware of tribalism, its markers and its crude power. There were no go areas for each allegiance. Behind this sort of demarcation lies not the work of any particularly subversive religious community, but our fear of difference. Human beings seem to prefer to live alongside people who are as much like them as possible. Newcomers rarely find a welcome: the three cathedral Canons from the Caribbean have powerful stories to tell of their experience of exclusion. New arrivals find the room they can in housing none else wants. People with wealth and power flee to the suburbs, and then to the villages. The new urban communities create an infrastructure of shops, and banks, and temples, and mosques. The call to prayer replaces the church bells. We need to note this, and attend to our own attitudes of hostility and fear.

Secondly it is important to note, agreeing with Bishop Michael, that in recent years Britain has lost confidence in the Christian faith. But he and I disagree about the cause and chronology. It is a process, labelled secularisation by the academics, which has been going on for centuries, and in the 19th century faster in this city than most. It is one reason why this cathedral never got the investment which our contemporaries at Guildford and Portsmouth's did get in the early 20th century. With the arrival of immigrants from world faith communities, governments national and local seized on the prevailing secular ethos and marginalised all faith communities hoping to keep all conflict at bay. So: no traffic signposts to the cathedral, because we might cause trouble too. Except that since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the London Underground government knows it does now have to work with people of faith. We need to note this, and take the opportunity to explain what the good news of the kingdom has to offer to all the people of our city.

Thirdly, it is important to note, and Bishop Michael does not, that, though there are Islamic extremists, especially amongst a younger, disillusioned generation, and these need to be

¹ 6 January 2008

² Church Times 11 January 2008

tackled without hesitation, there is also a majority which longs for a closer relationship with those around them, and with others of faith. Andrew Wingate, one of our Canons, has done much to establish strong friendships across the boundaries of faith, working particularly closely with Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, a British graduate, one of an emerging generation of Imams within British Islam who are reinterpreting the faith for today's needs. Ibrahim insists the Muslim community must take responsibility for creating bonds of trust and peace and says 'It saddens me to hear that a Muslim family are neighbours of a non-Muslim family and have perhaps never moved on from just saying hello to each other'. He often speaks at events with Andrew and has written in our diocesan magazine 'I know that Andrew would like me to be a Christian, and I would like him to be Muslim. This is extremely unlikely to happen, and so meanwhile we live in friendship with each other and learn from each other'³.

We need to note this, and attend to the strengthening of the bonds of peace which will dissolve the no go areas.

So where does all this fit with our readings:

Perhaps here:

With the acknowledgment that, as scripture indicates, place is important. We need place to feel secure, and home in which to flourish. But, as Jesus indicated, place is not the end in itself, but the means to an end. For if we feel secure we can build bridges across the boundaries of race, and culture, and class, and faith. So when our children and grandchildren ask us: what did the Christian grownups do for our city, rather than saying: we stopped the call to prayer being broadcast, we can say: we made new friends, we proclaimed God's kingdom of peace, and justice and healing. We drew new maps for the soul. We made this a place of salvation.

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³ Andrew Wingate: Free to Be; DLT 2002 p 62