

**'O JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM' 1 KINGS 8: (1,6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43**

It was Christmas 1973 and I was staying in a Jerusalem hostel staffed by German nuns who served there caring for those who were ill. They were funded by German atonement money as a gift to the Jews after WW2. Seated at my table on Christmas Eve, was a lovely woman who was the harpist with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Her shawl fell from her shoulders at one point and there on her arm were the numbers from the concentration camp. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem'.

My guide was an Hebrew Christian man named Chaim which means 'life'. I recall him taking me deep into an archaeological dig in the Old City to peer down a hole at the house of Caiaphas, the high priest in Jesus' time. As I craned to see, the harmonious voices of American Negro Christians wafted upwards as they began to sing, 'Jesus keep me near the cross'. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem.'

The Western or Wailing Wall is the holiest site in Judaism and is revered by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary. As it stands today, it is believed to have been built c.19 BC by Herod the Great. It is a place of prayer and pilgrimage. There is a dividing wall between the men's and women's section - as if God is sexist. God is both male and female and we are all made in God's likeness. There was an aluminium ladder on the female side and you won't be surprised when I reveal that I climbed up and looked over at the men. Like the women, many were placing paper prayer notes into the ancient crevices. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem'.

This leads us to our Old Testament reading and a question, 'Is Jerusalem an holy city?'

The elaborate work for the building of 'King Solomon's Temple' temple is finished c. 964BC. All is ready for the ceremony of dedication. The temple had been made so that it was more beautiful as you approached the place where the ark rested. It contained the 10 Commandments. When everybody was as one, a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not minister as they were propelled onto their faces. The glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. 'O that we were there, O that we were there.'

Somehow Solomon found the words to pray as the Spirit of God came upon him. First he honours God. 'There is no God like you who unswervingly keeps his covenant with his servants and relentlessly loves them as they sincerely live in obedience to your way. You always keep your word. Can it be that You, O Lord, will move into our place? Why the cosmos isn't large enough to give you breathing room, let alone this temple. But I Solomon am bold enough to ask, 'Please hear these prayers – both for others and for me. Please keep your eyes open on this temple night and day – the place of which you said, 'My name will be honoured there.' Please listen from your home in heaven and when you hear, forgive.' And when a foreigner comes from a distant land and prays here, please hear them, so that all peoples of the earth may know your name.'

And here we are in church together thousands of years later to worship and intercede. Solomon prayed for the times when there would be no rain: for times of famine and plagues. On a church in England is a phrase 'this church was built... to do the best of things in the worst of times.' We all know that the Name of the most High God cannot be contained in a building. God, through his beloved Son, Jesus, and the Blessed Holy Spirit still comes to meet us in the temple of our hearts and minds and even our bodies.

But – 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem' – Jesus still mourns.

And what of those who compete to have Jerusalem at the heart of their national identity? Will it ever be a holy city? What about a home for the Palestinians? God's holy quarters will not share room with sin; human injustice does not work the righteousness of God.

To sense the longings and hopes of his people is to further understand what the mission of Jesus means. It is inextricably bound up with Jerusalem. But Christ came. Sooner or later Jesus had to go up to Jerusalem – the city he loved and longed to gather as children under his wings. The NT writers would now portray Jerusalem in a new light. It had been 'the city of the great king' but now the scandal of the crucifixion of the Son of God would relegate it to another sin city, Sodom. The time had come when true worshippers did not need Jerusalem but could 'worship in spirit and in truth'.

Is Jerusalem a holy city? While it is a special city, unique for Christians, and dear to those of other faiths, we cannot put it on a pedestal. In Jerusalem, as elsewhere, God intends that people should 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God'.

Before I left Israel, Chaim took me to a Greek orthodox convent in Bethany. I met one of the most beautiful souls I have ever conversed with – Sr Celia. She was a Scottish widow of considerable means and had come to live with other pray-ers less than 2 miles or 3.2 kms from Jerusalem in Bethany. I eventually asked her why she was living here. Her answer, 'I am watching, praying and waiting until Christ returns.'

And He will come to us, or call for us, as we watch and wait and pray either in the Middle East or on Eyre Peninsula. AMEN



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