

## **“Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”**

Date: 25 August 2018

Text: Psalm 122, 2 Samuel 5: 1 - 12

Rev. Peter Coutts

“The world’s most intractable conflict” of the past 100 years has been Palestine / Israel. It is a political issue that revolves around Jewish and Palestinian peoples and their welfare, especially since WW2. But the tensions are also faith-related and theological. It is this latter reality that I’d like us to reflect on today, and to do that we have to think about King David.

But let’s start a little earlier. The Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) calls the place “the promised land” and Canaan. That promise started with Abraham. In Genesis 15 we hear God declare to Abraham, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt (the Nile) to the great river, the river Euphrates (in present day Iraq). That is the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” God desired the descendants of Abraham to form a people who by their example could show the world how God would have all peoples live. To help achieve that goal we hear God promising Abraham’s descendants a place to live out that way and be that example. So receiving this land, then, was not the goal, in and of itself, but rather the land was to be a means / a way to support this people in their pursuit of the greater goal of influencing the world. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph lived there—4 generations. But a great famine and Joseph (of technicolour dreamcoat fame) saw this extended family settling in Egypt where they in time became slaves. They lived in Egypt perhaps as long as 400 years. When Moses met God at the burning bush God promised to return the children of Israel to the promised land (Exodus 3): “to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” So what God’s promises both to Abraham and Moses makes clear is that the land of Canaan was quite occupied already by a number of tribal and territorial groups. Once Moses finished leading the exodus to the promised land we hear God commission Joshua to lead the people of Israel to “take the land” which started with the capture of the city of Jericho. And what follows in the Books of Joshua and Judges are many accounts of the Israelites fighting the locals for control of Canaan.

200 years later David arrives on the scene and continues the combat with locals to attain full political control of Canaan. As we take up his story in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel chapter 5 we find David being accepted as king by all the 12 tribes of Israel—an historic moment. His first act as king of all the people was to capture Jerusalem, a town of Canaanites. It was an attractive military holding because the town was built on a rise of land called Mount Zion. Based on archaeology it is estimated that the population of the town was 2,000—a quarter of the size of the town of Banff. David and his troops captured Jerusalem and made the city his capital—another historic moment. David’s ally—the king of Tyre—provided materials for David to build a house fit for a king and to be a home for a growing number of wives, concubines and children. With all these milestones we get a sense from this passage that David is now truly established in his reign. We read, “David then perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel and that God had exalted David’s kingdom for the sake of God’s people Israel.” The next chapter recounts how David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Another milestone. Later, David’s son, Solomon, would take this success to the next level by building the temple. All that the descendants of Abraham had hoped for, for generations, was coming true before their very eyes.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann reflects on this historic moment as a moment that prompted the Jews to imagine what was possible under God. The land was their’s, they were established and God made it all happen. This great culmination of a land, a king, a kingdom, a capital, a religious center, gave the people a confidence in their faith, but more than that. This historic pinnacle of success meant the land, Jerusalem, the temple became engraved into their culture as symbols that they were God’s people and that God was with

them. They became emblematic to them, signifying their status with God...and understandably so. So much so that Jerusalem and Canaan inextricably linked to their faith. This was all shattered in 70 AD when the Roman army destroyed the Temple and levelled Jerusalem. The Jews no longer had a homeland and over the following centuries found their home throughout Europe and northern Africa. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Jews comprised only 3% of the population of Palestine. But even though the legacy was gone it was still remembered with yearning. Every year at Passover, the traditional Seder supper ends with the words "next year in Jerusalem."

The emblematic nature of a promised land, Jerusalem, the Temple, a place for the people of God, became powerful symbols in the Zionist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century gave birth to the modern nation state in Europe, which prompted some Jewish thinkers to imagine that a nation state helpful to them as well. A widely cited slogan for those desiring a Jewish homeland was "A land without a people for a people without a land." As popular support in Europe grew for Zionism the natural question was raised, "So if Israel was constituted as a modern nation state (in the region called Palestine in those days), what would be its borders?" The Zionist answer was the territory King David had conquered because it represented the fulfilment of God's promise to the Israelites. This idea was taken so seriously that the British War Office actually commissioned Biblical scholars to describe (as best they could) what those boundaries were. In 1922 the League of Nations adopted the Mandate for Palestine and the territory set aside for Jewish Palestine closely aligned with the borders of David's Kingdom.

Zionists had this slogan, "A land without a people for a people without a land." Canaan was never a land without a people. Even when the promise of land was given to Abraham we hear God listing off ten different tribal groups already living there. Crossing into the promised land meant the Israelites of the exodus needed to take control away from the original residents. 250 years later King David was still at it. Nor was the slogan true in the 20<sup>th</sup> century either. In 1917 the British Government recognized this fact in the Balfour Declaration. It read, "His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, *it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.*" In other words, Britain wanted to promote the formation of Israel but also wished to see preserved the rights and interests of those already living there. This did not fully come to be. The 1948 war, that started the day after Israel's declaration of independence, resulted in 750,000 Palestinians becoming refugees by 1950. Today the United Nations recognizes 1.5 million Palestinian refugees living in 58 refugee camps. The British government acknowledged in 1939 that the local population's views should have been taken into account, and recognised in 2017 that the Balfour Declaration of 1917 should have called for greater protection of the Palestinian Arabs' political rights.

Today, there is an on-going call for greater justice for the sake of Palestinians within Israel. Since Israel's creation, the United Nations has voted on at least 42 resolutions against Israel for violating international law. Among them was a resolution in 2003 stating that the West Bank Wall contradicts international law and should be removed. But the injustices are not just one-sided, clearly. The world, through the United Nations, encouraged the formation of Israel as a country. Israelis are right to be concerned about their sovereignty and public safety. It is hard to imagine living in a place where suicide bombers have been a reality for many years, or enduring the sudden attack by rockets fired from Gaza onto the civilian population in Israel—a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions.

What makes the on-going story of injustice, bloodshed and war even sadder is the fact that Zionism was born out of injustice. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jews living in eastern Europe were the subject of prejudice and oppression. There was a great deal of pressure being put upon them to give up their unique ways of living and conform more to wider society. A good analogy for what was happening in eastern Europe

with the Jews is what was happening at the same time within Canada with our indigenous people in our determination to assimilate them into our culture by eliminating theirs. For all intents and purposes the Jews were experiencing something similar. This gave rise to the Zionist movement and the first waves of emigration to Palestine. Injustices against Jews prompted Zionism. Later, the urgency to deal with injustices against Jews was amplified by the Holocaust. It should be our hope that a country formed to rectify injustice against a minority people should be able to work for justice for minority peoples within its borders. As for the other side in this conflict, Palestinians wish to be recognized as a nation state but that is hard for the world to do when Hamas and other Palestinian groups are considered by Canada, the U.S. and the European Union to be terrorists, because of their behaviour. What is happening in Israel is not about Palestinian blood or Israeli blood. It is about human blood.

In 2011 the leadership of 13 Christian denominations in Israel (including Catholics, Orthodox, Coptic Christians, Lutherans and Anglicans) prepared the KAIROS Palestine Document. They are Christian Palestinians promoting a two-state solution to this endless conflict, encouraging non-violent resistance to any form of injustice and a movement towards peace through Arab-Jewish-Christian dialogue. These are wise, wise words.

They also call upon us to pray for peace in Israel. As a warrior king, David prayed prayers for peace as well. While he was a successful general it was David's desire to see the fighting stop, and so he prayed for peace. As I noted last week so many of the psalms come to us with brief introductory words. Psalm 122 is introduced to us as a psalm of David, a prayer for Jerusalem. Let us read it responsively and make it our prayer today for the land of Israel.