

6th Sunday of May, Matins

Zechariah 8: 1-13 and Revelation 21: 22-22.5

Mother Emma

The introduction to the prophecy of Zechariah has allowed scholars to set a very precise date for his writing – 520 BC, during the reign of King Darius of Persia. The people of Israel had recently been permitted to return to their native land, following decades of exile in Babylon, and they have found the country devastated by war, with the city of Jerusalem in ruins, and the Temple of Solomon – the traditional house of God – utterly destroyed. We cannot help but link this history to some of the scenes we currently see every day on our screens : images of people returning to their cities and villages, only to find that they have been torn apart by night attacks, their homes and places of worship unrecognizable. We see the grief, horror and exhaustion etched on the faces of those in Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, and can imagine how the Israelites must also have felt after years of exile returning to such scenes.

We are told that only the “faithful remnant” returned, too – many had died abroad, others had settled happily in Babylon, intermarrying with local people and with no wish to return to the broken country of their ancestors. But those who did, came in hope as well as trepidation, determined to rebuild the Temple, as well as the walls of Jerusalem, and to create a new place of security, peace and worship.

Through Zechariah, God reminded the people of Israel that Jerusalem was once again the holy seat of the Lord, and that they were called to build a worthy place for his Spirit to dwell. We hear reflected in Zechariah’s prophecies, the hopes of the people and the promises of the Lord to them. The beautiful descriptions of children playing in the streets, and of people living safely and healthily into old age are, one imagines, the kind of images which inspire and strengthen those fighting to defend their own countries and way of life against oppressors today. Perhaps they also contribute to the visions of hope – and nostalgia – which lead people of every nation to seek the common good, or to persevere when life seems to be at its toughest.

God’s reassurance culminates in the phrase translated in the King James Bible, which we have just heard, *“If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes?” saith the Lord of hosts.* A closer translation from the original, given that the sense of the word “marvellous” has changed over the centuries might sound more like this from the NRSV: *Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts?*

As we are told in the Gospels, *“Nothing shall be impossible with God.”* We hope and pray that the same vision of blessing will be offered to, and then brought to fruition for all those who face similar suffering today. Of course, although Jerusalem and its Temple were re-built even more gloriously, by the time of our second reading from the Revelation to St John, the Temple had once again been razed to the ground, this time by the Romans in 70 AD.

In John’s vision, too, is a new Jerusalem, but this time not the result of human hands, but a celestial Jerusalem which comes down from heaven from God himself. In this Jerusalem, there is no need for a temple, for God - and Christ himself, the Lamb who was slain, will form the holy of holies

themselves. In the new Christian world-view, which followed the resurrection of Christ, it was understood that religious devotion no longer had to be centred on the Temple in Jerusalem but had spread out into all the world. The new Jerusalem, with God on the throne in its midst, represented the dawn of a new world after the end of the age, a heavenly city where no light was needed because everything would be illumined by the glory of God and where all those who had died in faith would worship him forever. This new throne of God would be the source of an endless river of the water of life, which would bring hope and healing to all.

When I first arrived at St Mary Abbots and stood in the sanctuary, the allegorical image from Revelation which we heard today gave me tremendous inspiration. We are told that the water of life flowed out from the throne of God and of the Lamb, into the streets of the city, and on either side were trees which offered healing for the nations. If you stand here at the high altar, the place of the Eucharist by which we are nourished and sustained, you can see out of the open doors, the big trees in the graveyard lining the way towards the streets of the city. I found something hugely poignant about the thought that as we pass out of the doors, sustained and inspired by sharing in the glory of worship, we may carry with us that sense of the water of life flowing out into the city.

Perhaps through our compassion and desire to share our faith, stirred up by all we have encountered in worship, perhaps through our gratitude for the wonderful gifts of God in creation, seen in the trees (and at the moment the spring flowers), perhaps simply in the opening up of this place of prayer to all, we can be bearers of the water of life into the streets of the city.

Our readings today recall the endless cycle of humanity's strengths and failures. We forget too often and too easily the faults which have led to division, hostility and even bloodshed. The peace and security for which people have yearned for millennia may seem impossible to us, yet we are assured that nothing is impossible for God.

As we open our hearts and hands and carry the love of God out from his throne into the streets of our city, perhaps we can draw others to experience the eternal hope and peace which he brings.

Amen