



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Epiphany of the Lord

Jerusalem

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6, Ps 71, Ephesians 3: 2-3, 5-6, Matthew 2: 1-12

If the good burghers of the state of New Jersey were to announce that, in memory of their famous son, Frank Sinatra, the state capital was to be moved from the site of Washington's victory at Trenton to Hoboken the world would not cease turning.

I mention New Jersey because it is almost exactly the same size and population as another small but distant state, Israel. The acknowledgement by that lesser known Biblical scholar, President Trump, that Jerusalem, the capital of the state of Israel, is indeed the capital of the state of Israel caused an international meltdown at the United Nations.

Why the designation of this inhospitable strip of seaside sand dunes and rocky interior should be the stuff of vexatious and, apparently insoluble, international dispute is, of course, not simply a puzzle for our times. It is a three millennia old theological battleground dating back to the time of Israel's greatest king, David.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the coming of the Magi, the wise men from the East who come to pay homage to the new born King of the Jews. We

celebrate, in them, the opening of the Gospel Way to the Gentile world. We take all this for granted. Yet there is an obvious question. Given the situation of Israel then, why, even with special knowledge, should these men travelled hundreds of miles to ship up at the palace of some third rate puppet king of a small part of a minor Roman province. They came, quite naturally, to Jerusalem. They had to be redirected to Bethlehem.

There is no political or economic logic to their long pilgrimage. But there is 'THEOLOGIC'. The star that illuminates David's line and proclaims the Messiah leads them to his capital city. They must, however, begin at his birthplace. That is what all the prophets foretold. The Isaiah prophecies are particularly full of promises that this insignificant hilltop fort, Jerusalem, will become the very centre of the focus of all mankind and nations will acknowledge it as the capital of the world, the residence of divine presence. We cannot begin to imagine how far-fetched this would have seemed to even the most hopeful sixth century BC Jew.

Fast forward the centuries..... The city remains, at the time of the Nativity, Israel's capital. Within decades it will have been destroyed by the might of Rome but, nevertheless, become the central place of pilgrimage for those who believe that the Messiah has come and been sacrificed outside its walls and, risen from the dead, walked its streets.

Fast forward six more centuries and Mohammed tells his followers that Allah wants them to worship towards Jerusalem. (Allah later changes his mind and redirects the faithful to Mecca but nonetheless Mohammed then claims a mystical night journey to Jerusalem thereby 'validating' later Muslim territorial claims to the holy places of Jew and Christian.)

For all the monotheists, Jerusalem is the key city, out of all proportion to its size or otherwise political insignificance. Romans, Persians, Arabs, Fatimids, Seljuk Turks, Crusaders, Egyptians, Mamelukes and Islamists have all taken their turn in ruling this historic city. In the last century it became, once again, the capital of Israel. Donald Trump, the self-proclaimed genius, has, in his usual sensitive and nuanced way, simply recognised the current political reality.

For Christians the response is more complicated. We recognise the holy city and long for it to be, indeed, the city of peace. We grieve for our fellow Christians as they are increasingly bullied and ostracised and persecuted out of their homes right across the region and we are pledged to aid and defend them. But we will also have no truck with vicious Jew hatred. It stained our own continent's history from Martin Luther's incitement to genocide to Hitler's extravagant plans for just that end. We will have no truck with Jew hatred that fuels much of resurgent Islam and the longstanding determination to eradicate both Israel's state and people, from the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem's pact with Hitler in 1941 and later, in turn, to his acolyte, Yasser Arafat.

We believe in the Biblical prophecy.

We know why, with the wise men, we come on bended knee to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

With the Psalmist, we pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

We must defend the innocent against the Herod's of our time.

As followers of Jesus we honour the holy city but we also look forward to the eternal city, the Jerusalem which is above.

That is the capital city of our hearts and we must recognise that reality before all men so that they will know who is the King that we serve.

© 2017 Fowey Retreat