Sermon 16th August 2026

Trinity 11

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

Come Holy Spirit, take my lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them;
Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You. Amen.

Where was Jesus born? …Bethlehem. I went there in June and, as on previous visits, felt a continual sense of awe that I was in the town where Jesus was born. We will sing about Jesus's birth in Bethlehem in our offertory hymn this morning. I have heard that they have just been blessed with heavy rain in Bethlehem, as unusual for them in August, as our current weather is for us…

What was the name of the land, where Bethlehem stood, at the time of Jesus's birth? … The Roman Province of Judaea

Has Bethlehem ever been part of a country called Israel? In case you are beginning to think you have stumbled into the Bible Knowledge section of a pub quiz, rather than a sermon let me reassure you that there will be no tally of points, and no winners declared. Those who feel they have gained something from this, will know that for themselves. I hope no-one will feel any sense of having lost anything, but please let me know afterwards if you do.

So has Bethlehem ever been part of a country called Israel? No. It is just south of Jerusalem. Both of these towns were in the ancient Kingdom of Judah. The first and second temples were both in Jerusalem, and so also not in ancient Israel. This statement might leave some of you with a question about King Solomon. At this point I will just say that History and Archaeology haven't found any evidence for Solomon, but do come back to me on that later if you want to.

What is the connection between Biblical Israel and modern Israel? Opinions vary widely on this. Modern Israel came into being in 1948 when the British Mandate came to an end and when a group who called themselves Zionists, with the agreement of the United Nations, took over the coastal plain of Palestine and renamed it Israel. According to the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand, the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, had regular meetings in the 1950's with historians, Bible scholars and politicians when they trawled through the Old Testament, searching for biblical foundations for the new State of Israel. Sands observes that Ben-Gurion 'genuinely identified with Moses and Joshua'[i]

This understanding of the Old Testament continues into the present. At the United Nations, in 2020, the Israeli ambassador Danny Danon held up a Bible and asserted it was Israel's deeds to the land.[ii]

Among contemporary scholars, neither Archaeology, nor Biblical Studies concur with Danon's view. The archaeologists despite all their efforts, have found no evidence to support the existence of the Kingdom of David and Solomon. Biblical Scholars now date the writing of the Old Testament documents to during and after the Babylonian exile, so after 586 BC. This has implications for how we view the patriarchal era, and what we make of myth and legend. It seems there is little historical reality in these stories, but that doesn't mean they are 'untrue' in the profoundest meanings of the words 'truth', and 'myth'. If ever we needed robust, evidence-based study of Theology, Language, Literature and History it is now, yet the Humanities are being cut back in universities.

If Bethlehem has never been in Israel where is it? Bethlehem is now in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, also called the West Bank. This is the area of Palestine that remained when the Zionists took over the coastal plain. For the Palestinians this was a catastrophe, a Nakba. With the ending of the British Mandate, the remainder of Palestine came under the control of Jordan, and was called the West Bank because from the Jordanian perspective it's on the west bank of the River Jordan. Gaza came under the auspices of Egypt. In 1967 Israel went to war with the surrounding Arab states and occupied both the West Bank and Gaza. The occupation of the West Bank continues to this day with the position of Gaza being slightly different. The status of being an occupied territory is covered extensively by international law.[iii] The easiest way to find out more about this is to check Wikipedia. It is illegal for the occupying power to transfer its own population to the occupied territory or to deny the human rights of the civilians. Israel is very well aware of this, but nonetheless there are many Israelis, referred to as settlers, who are terrorising the civilians, and building large settlements along with extensive infrastructure in the West Bank. They withhold water, intimidate them at gunpoint, close the roads, set up checkpoints, and demolish their homes.

Hang on, isn't it the Palestinians who are the terrorists? There have been periods of Palestinian terrorism, and most of you will remember the suicide bombings, as well, of course as Hamas's actions on 7th October. The Palestinians haven't been immune to terrorist actions, but it certainly isn't as one-sided as we see Israel trying to claim. The first terrorists in Palestine were the Irgun Zionist group who blew up the King David Hotel in 1946 when 91 people were killed. See Wikipedia for more details.

On my way back from Bethlehem, I bought a copy of the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz at the airport, very much with John Parkin in mind – he recommended Ha'aretz in his sermons more than once. In the paper is an article by the former prime minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, who talks about the need to 'confront the rampant Jewish terrorism in the West

Bank'[iv] You may have heard him speak on the BBC, which he is invited to do from time to time.

Bethlehem is feeling the pressure of this as a big settlement is being built in the neighbouring town of Beit Sahour, the town which is home to the Shepherds' Field – that is the shepherds from Luke's nativity story. Bethlehem and Beit Sahour are the centres of Christianity in the land where Jesus lived, but the inhabitants, Muslim and Christian alike, are feeling that they live in a large prison, ever more deprived of the essentials to make life worth living, and under constant fear of the actions of the settlers. On Friday there was a shooting in Beit Sahour by a settler, fortunately on this occasion, not made any worse because of the presence there of some Jewish activists of the organisation Combatants for Peace

My own experience of being in Bethlehem was to feel warmly welcomed and completely safe. The Zoughbi family I stayed with saw to that, and I wasn't there for long enough to suffer any of the humiliations frequently suffered by the Palestinians.

Do all Jews support modern Israel? There are a large number of Jewish groups, who oppose the settlers, and the policies of the Israeli government in Gaza and the West Bank. There are Rabbis for Human Rights; ICAHD (Israeli Committee against House Demolitions), Jewish Voice for Peace, and the Jewish Bloc for Palestine to name a few. As with Combatants for Peace, there are a significant number of Jewish activists who go to the West Bank to try to give a protective shield to the Palestinians.

A large Jewish bloc is always present on the well-organised, peaceful, multi-faith demonstrations for Palestine that take place in London from time to time.

What do Christians say? In the midst of huge despair, the leaders of the Palestinian Christians produced a prophetic document in 2009 called *Kairos Palestine*, when they asked the world-wide Church to pay attention to what they were going through and to come and see for themselves. Few churches from this country took up the invitation. Last November the Palestinian Christians produced *Kairos Palestine II*, subtitled *'A Moment of Truth: Faith in a time of genocide'*[v]. I am very pleased to say that after a long wait, the recent Church of England Synod voted to 'hear' what is being said in the two documents, and to examine their investments in the light of the call for boycotting Israel as long as they continue to oppress the Palestinians. The *Kairos II* document is available online, and has been beautifully produced in print – some of you have already had copies and more will be available soon.

In this document, they say that they 'honour the growing number of Jewish voices that oppose the war and confront Zionism from moral, faith-based and human conviction' (3.12), as well they appeal to the churches of the world to pressure their governments to hold Israel accountable to international law and to adhere to the Jewish and Christian principles

of justice and peace. (3.10). The churches, including our own, have, in my view, been lamentably slow to do this.

The Methodist Church also endorsed *Kairos II,* but there is a large body of Christians who ignore it, and who ignore the existence of the indigenous Palestinian Church. They are called Christian Zionists, a movement that began in this country but is now mainly found in the mega-churches in the United States. *Kairos II* describes Christian Zionism as: a theology of racism, colonialism and ethnic supremacy, a theology that has produced apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide of indigenous peoples. They go on to say that their teachings are utterly alien to the core of Christian faith and ethics. (3.7).

But shouldn't we Christians be balanced and fair to both the Israelis and the Palestinians? When the scales of justice are weighted so much in favour of the world's empires, to achieve balance we must place ourselves on the side of the oppressed – everywhere, including the Palestinians. This is what the prophets called for. This is what Isaiah, in our OT reading means when he says 'maintain justice and do what is right.' In *Kairos II*, the Palestinian Church leaders say:

> We challenge the false logic of a "neutral" or "balanced" peace as well as forms of ecclesial diplomacy that do not speak truth to power as a way of evading moral and spiritual responsibility' (3.6)

Is any of this anti-semitic? The systematic anti-semitism that led to the Holocaust brought humanity to the depths of depravity, and that sort of anti-semitism must be always be resisted. Unfortunately, as Norman Finkelstein, whose parents survived the holocaust, has shown anti-semitism is now being exploited and manipulated to silence those who speak out about the oppression of the Palestinian people. The title of his book, '*The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the exploitation of Jewish suffering'* says it all. Finkelstein says that the current weaponisation of anti-semitism disrespects those who perished in the Holocaust.

The politician Andrew Feinstein's mother survived the holocaust by being hidden in a coal cellar as a child. He reminds us that the lesson of the holocaust is 'never again for *all humanity'*, and points out that the Palestinians had nothing to do with the Holocaust, but they are suffering the consequences of the establishment of the genocidal state of Israel[vi]. In the Ha'aretz article, Ehud Olmert argues that anti-semitism should not be confused with condemnation of what the Israeli government is doing, or with opposition to policies and actions carried out in Israel's name.

What do we learn from our readings today? As the first Church grew, from its beginnings among the Jews, it started to spread among other peoples. This raised some questions for them, which we see being considered in our two New Testament readings. The first of these to be written was the one addressed to the Romans by Paul. It's part of a long and

difficult discussion that we have followed over the last two Sundays, beginning in chapter 9. With today's reading, from chapter 11 we are close to the end of this discussion. Paul begins the section in chapter 9, by saying how he is full of sorrow that so many of his own people are rejecting the good news of salvation through Christ, then by quite a circuitous route, he arrives at the question at the beginning of today's reading: has God rejected them? "No", he asserts. He, himself, after all, is an example of an Israelite with impeccable credentials. He goes on to say that the 'gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Roms 11:29). God, in fact, shows mercy to all, Jews and Greeks, alike.

The evangelist Matthew was also a Jew, also thinking through to what extent the new Gentile Christians were expected to follow the Law and traditions. Our long Gospel reading has largely been copied from Mark's Gospel, with some changes that suggest, as also seen in chapter 23, that Matthew didn't have a high opinion of the Pharisees. This is not encouraging an anti-semitic tendency (as has been suggested), these are valid constructive criticisms about what one group of Jews are imposing on another group of Jews, even if the language is a bit over the top. I think most of us, remembering John Hull, recoil at the negative imagery of blindness here and in other biblical passages.

Matthew's criticism of the Pharisees is that they 'tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others'[vii] The 'heavy burdens' are the details of the traditions that built up around the Law of Moses – 613 additional instructions that were passed on orally.[viii] These included the food laws. So as an example, later on in chapter 23, Matthew shows Jesus as saying:

> You tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.

This is also what's being said in today's reading – the details of the food laws are not important – what we ingest doesn't make us spiritually unclean, it's what goes on in our hearts. All sorts of evil intentions might come from the heart, but we are called to turn ourselves around, Jews and Greeks alike, and to seek to be pure in heart, as it says in the Beatitudes. The way to do this, is not to worry about externalities – food laws and hand-washing, it is to cultivate the weightier matters of right relationships: justice, mercy and faith.

In the account of the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter, we see Jesus himself turning around and becoming merciful as a result of his conversation with the woman. At first Jesus's comments are harsh – "I am only here for the people of Israel", he says, even using the insult of 'dogs' to refer to this non-Israelite family, but the woman persists and Jesus recognises her faith and acts with mercy towards her daughter. In this account, Matthew is saying that the Gentiles are saved through their faith, there is no need for them to become Jews.

With both of these readings we must note that the use of the words Israel and Israelite is used in the sense of a people, not in the sense of a country. Between 720 BC and 1948 AD, there was no country called Israel.

So both Paul and Matthew began life as faithful Jews, something they didn't give up, but their encounter with Jesus led them to widen their understanding of the nature of the love of God. God hasn't rejected their people, but in Jesus, God is reminding us of the words spoken through the later prophets of the Isaiah school, as we heard in our Old Testament reading:

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples'

The Palestinian Christians are proud to be the sons and daughters of the first Church, the people who wrote so eloquently about Jesus's teaching of the love of God for Jew and Greek, about how 'Jesus Christ walked with the poor and the weak, stood beside the oppressed, and never abandoned love or compromised truth and justice. For the sake of the salvation of humanity, he accepted the cross. His resurrection was victory over death and injustice, a sign of hope rooted in faith'. This, they say is the hope that sustains them today. (2.11).

What can we do to support them? I'm finishing with a question. John Parkin would have approved.

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[i] Sands Shlomo, *The Invention of the Jewish People,* Verso 2009, p 108
[iiii] https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/israeli-ambassadors-bible-speech-at-un-goes-viral-589986 [accessed 14.8.26]
[iii] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_occupation [accessed 12.8.26]
[iv] Ha'aretz , 19th June 2026, p5
[v] https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/Final_Kairos_document_II_English.pdf [accessed 12.8.26]
[vi] Feinstein, Andrew *From Zionism's Birthplace, a Jewish Anti-Zionist Movement Emerges* U-tube video [accessed 14.8.26]
[vii] Matthew 23:4
[viii] Walton, Robert C ed. *A Source Book of the bible for Teachers,* SCM Press, 1970, section on *Jewish Religious Life in the First Century AD* by John Bowden