

In the first three weeks of Lent, Fr William and I reflected on Christ's Temptations in the Wilderness – reflections on materialism, with the challenge to change stones into bread, on pride and invulnerability with the second temptation and on the pursuit of power when on the mountain the Devil offered Christ sovereignty over all things if only He would bow down in worship.

And we have tried to ask what the temptations would have meant for His ministry and the character of His Messiahship if He had given into them and how His ministry clearly refuted them. How are His temptations our own?

This Sunday and next we are going to reflect on Jerusalem, both the physical city in Palestine, and what it meant to the Jews of Jesus' day and of what it might mean to us as Christians, and next week on the heavenly Jerusalem, heavenly Salem.

Jerusalem is, of course, rarely out of news whether it is with modern states' choosing to recognise it as a capital fifty years after the Israeli conquest it during the Six Day War, as Guatemala has chosen to do this week gone or whether it is in the locking of the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre two weeks ago in protest at the Israeli government's discrimination (through rents and taxes) against the Christian presence there, now reversed thanks to the intercession of King Abdulla II of Jordan.

But what did it mean in Jesus' day? What might it mean to us?

If you go to Hereford Cathedral you will find one of the most famous maps of Western history, the so called 'Mappa Mundi', map of the world, an early fourteenth century representation of the world as a great orb divided into three between Asia, Africa and Europe – the known continents of the day - with Jerusalem at the centre of the map. The populations of Shem, Japheth and Ham, the sons of Noah, covered the known planet; Jerusalem was at the centre.

Surprising as it may seem, throughout the mediaeval period access to Jerusalem and the holy sites, was guaranteed by the Muslim dynasties, the Fatimids of Egypt, that controlled the area such that until about 1400 Christians outnumbered the Muslim population of city and far outweighed the Jewish settlers. What was so important?

For the Jews of Jesus' lifetime, and those before and after Jerusalem was pre-eminently the place where God had chosen to dwell. This was the sacred city, made holy by the presence of God in the tabernacle, brought there by David and enshrined in the Holy of Holies within the great Temple.

‘Walk about Zion, go round about her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels’, sings the Psalmist proudly (Ps. xlviii, 12, 13). And the Psalmist, King David no less, would know for it was here that he was king. For the Israelite nation, the Jewish people, Jerusalem was distinct not because it was because God had chosen to dwell there but because it was the only place in which he dwelt. Unlike the pagan cults and mystery religions of the ancient near east, with a myriad of temples in every township and city, on the high places and in the plain, there was for the Jew only one place in which the Temple of the Lord had been built. Jerusalem, ‘the City of Peace’.

Synagogues abounded in every place where there were enough Jewish men to constitute them. But there was, until it was destroyed by the Romans, only one Temple, one place on Mount Zion where God had come to dwell. Although the Prophets could imagine God leaving his sanctuary, abandoning his people (Ezekiel vii and xxvi), there was only one Temple. When Pompey ransacked it and entered the Holy of Holies, wherein only the high priest of the year was ever allowed, he found an empty space. No cult statue, no image, no figurative design to describe God’s presence. Just absence.

In Psalm cxii we hear that the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to give thanks for the Name of the Lord. Jesus, like all Jewish men before Him and since, went up to the Temple, where it pleased God to dwell. Indeed, all of Jesus’s earthly ministry, from his birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, through his childhood years in the hick countryside of Galilee in Nazareth and around, is a journey that ultimately ends up coming to Jerusalem.

Of course, we know, that Jesus had been there before, as the precocious twelve year old who outstayed the pilgrimage with his parents to teach in the Temple, and at the time of other festivals but it is in the last few weeks of His life that he prepared His disciples for this final journey. Going up to Jerusalem, to die. First, He cast out the traders in the Temple (much to their evident chagrin) and then returned daily to teach, basing himself with friends in Bethany but always drawn back to the place where God, His Father, dwelt.

Jesus met a death long foretold. Our pilgrimage may not be as dramatic or have such a violent outcome but the former archbishop of Canterbury reminded all Christians that we should, at least once in our lives, go up to Jerusalem. When such journeys have been made difficult by occupying forces, Christians have resourcefully built models of Jerusalem elsewhere – the *sacri monti* of Piedmont, for instance, the church complex around the Sepulchre church in Bologna and the foundation stone of the city of Borgo San Sepolcro in Tuscany, recreating in places the Via Crucis, the final journey walked on earth of Him who now reigns in the heavenly Jerusalem. To whom be glory for evermore. Amen.