

In Galatians 4:25-6, Paul uses the image of the 'earthly Jerusalem' which, in his mind, embodies an approach to God that is restricted to a single place, a single people, and a law that condemns, and contrasts this city with the 'Jerusalem from above' which he describes as 'our mother'. It is the inheritance of the Christian through the grace of God and the indwelling of the Spirit. In the Bible, this symbolic, heavenly Jerusalem is also contrasted with another city that was both literal and symbolic: Babylon. This is first depicted by the tower of Babel: mankind joins forces in a demonstration of strength and defiance against God, seeking to reach heaven by their own means. It can be said that the Bible depicts the system of the world without God's presence as Babylon; or as Paul puts it¹, 'all powers that rise up against the knowledge of God'.

Today I would like us to look further at what this Jerusalem from above looks like, as seen by the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah lived at a time when the people of Israel were starting to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem after returning from exile. Zachariah prophesied to encourage the builders, and in addition, said that the work they were doing was simply a foreshadowing of what God was going to do subsequently, in the new covenant.

The first thing to note is that this Jerusalem cannot and should not be measured. I think that Moroccan comedian Gad Elmaleh, in his show *'l'Autre, c'est moi'*, pretty much nailed it when he describes IKEA. 'See, at IKEA, you get a plastic tape measure to measure what you're going to buy, and gradually you find yourself in the grip of a strange disease: You want to measure everything! It's as if you've got some magical power (...)! You say to yourself: 'Everything can be measured'. You walk past a light fitting. You measure the base. You say to yourself: '47 cm? I'd have thought it was larger!'

As he correctly observed, to measure is to control. But the new Jerusalem cannot be measured. This reminds us that we cannot control God or what comes from God. In the Kingdom of God, we have no option but to acknowledge our inadequacy, and we need to ensure we do not start trying to use God as a means to our own ends.

There's also a second good reason why the new Jerusalem cannot be measured: it is invisible. The writer to the Hebrews draws a contrast between the people of Israel, who drew close to a 'mountain that could be touched' and 'the Mountain

¹ 2 Cor 10:5

of Zion and... City of the living God... The heavenly Jerusalem².' Paul says that 'we look, not to those things that are visible, but to those things that cannot be seen; for that which is visible is temporary, and those things that cannot be seen are eternal³.'

Lastly, there is a third reason why the dimensions of this city cannot be measured: the angel explained to Zachariah that it is an 'open city' (v8) and should stay that way. It cannot be measured because it has no defined limits.

This new Jerusalem is the city of God; the people of God; our motherland; our inheritance. The letter to the Hebrews describes it as the 'assembly of the first born of God⁴.' It is true that for now, we are in what I often call the 'now and the not yet'; we are in this present age, but we are mere pilgrims and strangers there. We are a little like the characters in the film Matrix, on board their vessel travelling over a devastated Earth, in the knowledge that their native city of Zion is waiting to welcome them back.

Today, I believe it is important for us to be reminded of our identity, and that of our heavenly homeland, in the light of these three characteristics of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Firstly, it is important for us to commit ourselves to God rather than seeking to measure, control or restrict him. Zachariah's vision reminds us that the heavenly Jerusalem cannot be measured; similarly, we should not reduce our Christian commitment to purely human calculations, or think solely in terms of power plays. Some try to enlist God on their side: to do so is to forget that he is far above us. We must be sensible in our day-to-day affairs, and we need to bear in mind that life is more than figures. The lesson we learn from the various miracles of feeding the multitudes is that the fewer material resources we have, the greater the miracle from God. The Kingdom of God does not lend itself to human calculations.

Secondly, we need to remember that the most important things for us are those that cannot be seen. Some people are losing hope because humanly speaking, the outlook is too depressing; but 'he who is in heaven laughs⁵'; similarly, Elisha's servant could not see the 'chariots of the LORD', of which there were many more

² Heb 12:18,22

³ 2 Cor 4:18

⁴ Heb 12:23

⁵ Ps 2:4

than those of the adversary⁶. The walls of Jericho looked pretty sturdy, yet they fell in an instant. The Iron Curtain also appeared inviolable, but back in the day it came down overnight – and I believe the seven years of prayer for the Soviet Union, launched by Open Doors from 1982-89, may well have contributed to that. Similarly, our day-to-day testimony is invisible. It will not make the headlines, but that does not mean that it has no impact. Our words and our gestures can make a real difference in the life of ordinary people around us. The most important things take place in people's hearts. That cannot be seen, but that does not make these things any less important.

Lastly, and above all, we need to remember that our heavenly city is called to be an open city. Jerusalem may be a city without walls, but the world around us is increasingly being characterised by walls going up; we should not follow the trend.

Today, people are talking about the return of the Cold War; it's becoming harder and harder to cross borders; international alliances of all kinds are being put to the test by isolationist policies; in Israel, the 'Wall of Shame' runs right through the physical city of Jerusalem; and more walls are being planned, whether it's on the Mexican border or in Calais. These physical walls bear witness to other walls going up, walls that are not so visible but just as real; the messages gaining traction at the moment are messages of division rather than unity. People are afraid of globalisation and terrorism. The media fuel all kinds of fears and the response of many reasonable people appears to be withdrawal: people take shelter hoping that the whole thing will go away.

Openness has always been part of our church's DNA, but I feel it's worth emphasising this again because I believe it may well be significantly put to the test in the future. I would like to encourage you to nurture this state of mind, which corresponds to our heavenly homeland, and push the envelope still further. After all, it is easy to be open with those who are also open. 'And if you do nothing more than greet your brothers, what is so extraordinary about that? Even the pagans do that' says Jesus⁷. Building bridges with people who are not like us, who we despise, who we are afraid of, who we might even hate, is a real

⁶ 2 K 6:16-17

⁷Mt 5:47

challenge. But that is the mission entrusted to us by the one who was called a 'friend of sinners'⁸.

A 'city without walls' also allows its inhabitants to come and go as they please. As I have often said, the mission of our church is not built some kind of Disneyland Empire, but to be a rest area from which we can leave, refreshed (and perhaps relieved...), to continue our journey. It is not somewhere we are seeking to keep people as our property, but a place where we are seeking to build them up and equip them. In technical terms, we are into empowerment and not submission; making people self-reliant rather than dependent, so that they can be active Christians whether they find themselves. This is the exact opposite of enfeeblement, which is the preserve of autocratic regimes and fear-mongering media.

In Zechariah, God makes this promise: 'I will be like a wall of fire around the city, and I will show my glory in it' (v6). We are not counting on human resources but on the Spirit of God to go with us and dwell in us, leading us into all truth and pouring the love of God into our hearts to drive away all fear. If we seek God's glory, we can trust him to preserve our identity and enable us to be true witnesses for him, as we constantly seek to become more and more of an 'open city'.

⁸Mt 11:19