

Sermon 9th November 2014 - "Promised Land?"
Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT
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Joshua 24:1-3,14-25

In the name of God, creator, redeemer, sustainer.

Joshua is one of the key figures of the Hebrew Bible, perhaps inferior only to Abraham and Moses and David. The book of Joshua tells the story of how, after the death of Moses, the people of Israel enter Canaan, the land promised to them from the time of Abraham some 500 years before. Joshua leads the victories firstly over Jericho, then over the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – as told in today's chapter, 24. Thirty-one kings in all were defeated, each listed in Joshua chapter 12. It's around 1200BC when Joshua gathers the people at Shechem, as we read today, to confirm what God has done for them and to renew God's covenant with them. The people of Israel have taken possession of the Promised Land.

The promised land. Most of you know that over the past 25 years I've been involved in the cause for peace between Israel and Palestine. I've visited there five times, twice this year. The outlook for peace is as bleak as ever.

When celebrated Jewish historian Ilan Pappé was here in Canberra in 2012, he spoke at the National Press Club, just down the road. Pappé has long been a critic of Israeli Government policies, he strongly supports the ending of the occupation of the Palestinian territories, the withdrawal of the illegal settlements in the West Bank, and negotiations for a permanent peace. He was asked at the Press Club what are the major obstacles preventing peace between Israel and Palestine. He said there are three – he named the first as the Christian religious right in America, the second as the Jewish lobby in America, and the third as the military-industrial complex in America. That rather shocked me, putting Christians as the greatest obstacle of all.

One of the key theological issues behind the conflict between Israel and Palestine is that of the Promised Land. The American religious right, and the more radical Jews themselves, take the view that God has promised the land to the Jewish people, so the Palestinians, all 5.8million of them, simply have to get out of God's way. Right-wing Israeli politicians, some of them ministers in the current government, refer to the West Bank and Gaza as Judea and Samaria, and assert that it's all part of the promised land, and that therefore people of faith throughout the world should support the Israeli occupation and conquest of the Palestinian territories. They see it as a territorial right sealed by God's promises in the Bible.

The American religious right might see it that way, but the rest of the world church is not so sure. In recent years churches across the world have begun to wrestle with the theological question of the Promised Land, with North American and European churches, the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, leading the way – and there's a growing consensus that the view in Genesis and Exodus and Joshua about territorial rights promised by God is not the full story.

It's fair to say there are three main views across the worldwide church about the Promised Land.

The first view is that of territorial right. At four or five places in Genesis God promises land to the descendants of Abraham. 17:7-8 for instance reads

"I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

So the conquest of Canaan in Joshua's time, and the rights of the Jewish people to have ownership of all that land, is in accord with God's purpose. The Bible says so. Who are we to go against God? End of story. That's the first view.

The second view is more nuanced. It accepts that God promises land to the descendants of Abraham but sees it as a qualified or conditional promise. The covenant between Israel and God is always a two-sided covenant. If the promise is to be fulfilled then Israel is to remain faithful to God, always following God's ways. This view is supported by today's reading about the renewal of the covenant at Shechem. Joshua presses the people hard about serving only the God of Israel, about forsaking all other gods, and the people declare firmly they will serve the Lord and him only. Only then is the covenant refreshed and the laws that go with it are spelt out.

On this view the case can be made that Israel as a nation today is failing to follow God's way of justice and peace and that therefore it has no Biblical right to the territory of the Promised Land. That's the second view.

Then the third view holds that in the ministry of the prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Jonah, in many of the Psalms, and above all in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, we learn that God is the God of the whole earth, that God has created and loves the whole of creation and the whole of humanity, and that all people are offered the gift of being part of God's family in God's world. On this understanding the Promised Land has been enlarged to become the whole world and the beneficiaries of God's promises are all who put their faith in him. God's grace is not limited to any one nation or people, God's gifts are not one piece of land for one particular people, but are the whole earth for the whole human race and for all God's creatures.

This is a very inclusive understanding of how God wishes all humanity to live together in peace and with justice. This is the understanding of the church in Palestine. Five years ago Palestinian Christians issued a key document, Kairos Palestine, urging the world to work harder than ever for a peaceful and just solution to the plight of the Palestinian people. In this document they say

"We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of election, of the people of God, open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land."

A growing number of churches in Europe and North America take this view. They are joining the movement to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine and to recognise Palestine as a nation with or without agreement from Israel. They are doing so while still acknowledging repentance for the dreadful centuries-long anti-Semitism in church history which led last century to the Holocaust. That's the third view.

Let me be clear that Christians support peace, freedom and justice for the people of Israel as well as for the people of Palestine, for the good news of Jesus Christ tells us God's love is for all. In September, at the Uniting Church ministers conference in Jerusalem, we received presentations from the Bishop of the Lutheran Church in the Holy Land, from the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and from a senior rabbi from Reform Judaism. Bishop Younan and Rabbi Kronish both suggested that Israel and Palestine need to start afresh from the conviction that all people are created in the image of God and are loved by God. Sheikh Hussein noted that one of the 99 names of God in the Koran is al-Waddud, "the loving", and similarly suggested that Palestine and Israel need to start from the common conviction that God loves all.

Here in Australia we need to do more theological thinking about God's promises of land for the ancient people of Israel, God's desire for all to live in peace and justice, and God's love for the whole of humanity. And then we need to act on what we believe God is telling us. Stay tuned.

To the glory of God, Amen.