CTBI conference

Christianity: continuity, presence and conflict

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Bible Study 2 - Presence

Conflict, presence and continuity. I wonder what was in the minds of those who selected the theme for this conference when they selected the word 'presence'? Were they inviting us to reflect on the presence of God… and it has rightly been said that the quest for the presence of God is at the heart of all religion? Or were they asking us to remember the presence of the Christian communities in the Middle East, their faithfulness there through many centuries? Or were they, as it seems to me, inviting us to discover the connections between these two aspects of presence – something that was perhaps hinted at in our first study this morning, when I explored how Jacob saw the 'face of God' in both the night-time divine wrestler and in the meeting with his brother Esau the following morning.

Some of what I am saying here is drawn from a small book on Jerusalem I wrote recently for the World Council of Churches called *Peace-ing Together Jerusalem* – excuse the pun – it seeks to explore what Jerusalem means in Christian theology and practice. At one point in that book I comment that for me the entire story of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, can be summed up in the following question: 'How can the eternal God be present with and for human beings, and through such presence transfigure the whole of creation?'

From the biblical perspective, Jerusalem is certainly part of that story of God's presence with humanity. So I have selected a biblical text which invites us to engage with Jerusalem, as holy city and as God's own home, whether seen in positive or negative terms. But which text? When it comes to Jerusalem there is an embarrassment of biblical riches.

There are the glorious Jerusalem psalms, such as 48 and 50, with their soaring language celebrating the city as 'the perfection of beauty' and the place where the godhead truly dwells. There are the visionary longings of prophets such as Isaiah, speaking of Jerusalem's destiny in the latter days, to be a place from which peace will proceed for the whole earth. There is the much more ambiguous Psalm 137 in which longing for Jerusalem by the waters of Babylon leads ultimately to the bitter vindictiveness of the psalm's conclusion. There are Jesus' own laments over Jerusalem in the Gospels – and indeed we will touch on one of them in the next Bible study. There is Revelation's dramatic picture of the heavenly city. All are part of the biblical saga of Jerusalem, all woven into the intricate fabric of God's presence and dealings with humanity.

But my main focus this evening is on a biblical text that I had to engage with regularly during the years I myself lived in Jerusalem. I studied and then worked in the city for a period of five years. My first professional job was as Course Director of St George's College, a continuing education institute attached to the Anglican cathedral in Jerusalem to which clergy and laity from all around the world came to spend some weeks or months exploring the land and the city – precisely because of its link to divine presence.

One of the questions that my work at St George's College confronted me with was 'Is there a place for holy places within Christian theology' or to put it another way, 'Does the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ invalidate the need for physical manifestations of holiness'? The question could be addressed to particular places and sites, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but at the macro-level it was also a question to address to the city and the land itself. In what sense, if any, is this land and this city 'special' or 'sacred' within the purposes of God, and what might that mean for us as

Christians as we seek to live out our faith, as individuals and communities, in our contemporary world?

Some Christians, perhaps particularly some holding perspectives associated with mainline western Protestantism, would seek to argue that the New Testament invalidates or declares redundant notions of holiness tied to physical places: wasn't this being expressed when Christ 'cleansed' the Jerusalem Temple? It was in a sense a bread-and-butter question for those of us at St George's College. For after all, why should we encourage Christians from around the world to come and learn in the Holy Land and Holy City if the concept of Holy Land and City was itself deeply questionable?

Yes, certainly, an acquaintance with the landscape and geography of the country could throw light upon particular passages of scripture; yes certainly the open spaces of Galilee – though perhaps rather less the bustle of Jerusalem – did enable many people to feel somehow closer to the spirit of Jesus during his earthly ministry, but was this enough? If that is all that the Holy Land means for the Christian faith surely it was a form of religious self indulgence for people to spend such considerable sums going there on pilgrimage, when the money could have been better used.

'Should it not have been sold and given to the poor' was a question once posed to Jesus himself? And were not those whose work and lives were so bound up with St George's College, therefore, also deceiving themselves in facilitating and colluding with such self indulgence? This is a logical consequence of suggesting that Jerusalem – and the land in which it is situated – has no special theological meaning for Christians.

Given the current context of Israel/Palestine the question of the holiness of the land and city for Christians has also political implications and consequences. Have some of the Christian churches, perhaps acutely embarrassed by the history of the Crusades, been too ready to concede to Judaism and Islam, our sister Abrahamic faiths, their theological 'rights' without also asking that our own should also be taken seriously? What indeed could it mean for our vision of Jerusalem's future, and for the future of our Christian brothers and sisters in the land, if we wrestle with what it means to name Jerusalem as a 'holy city'?

Archbishop Joseph Raya, a former Greek Catholic Archbishop of Galilee, observed that the 'holiest place' of all for Christians is an *empty* tomb: that ambiguity perhaps suggests that holy places *are* important for Christians – even if our resurrection faith may also be called to transcend them.

In those years when I taught at St George's College, one of the places to which I most enjoyed taking our students was the site on the outskirts of modern Nablus. This commemorates the occasion recorded in John 4.4-42 when Jesus met a woman by the well of Samaria, acknowledged his thirst, and the two of them, a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman, engaged in one of the most profound theological discussions in the New Testament.

It is part of this passage that I have selected to focus on. In the shadow of Mount Gerizim, Jesus and the woman discussed together whether it was 'on this mountain (Gerizim) or in Jerusalem that people should worship God' (John 4.20-21). According to John, Jesus then reflected 'the hour is coming when neither in this place nor in Jerusalem will human beings worship God: God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth' (John 4.24).

What do those words mean? Should they be seen, as they often have been, as suggesting that since the coming of Christ, who is himself the truth, veneration for holy places – for

Jerusalem or Gerizim – is redundant, or even positively harmful? Christ himself is now *the* holy place, the location and presence where humanity can meet God.

Yet as I explored the issue more deeply I discovered that the answer may not be quite as simple as that. For at the time of Christ the question of holy places had become a *cause celebre* between the Jews and the Samaritans, the very point and focus of their division and conflict. They did not have any real quarrel over theology or doctrine, but instead fought bitterly over whether Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim was God's preferred spot. Holy places had ceased to be a help towards God's glorification and instead become ends in themselves: a sacramental means of grace, intended to be a window open to God, had become part of a shuttered and closed system.

I always found it the most delicious irony that there, where Jesus met the woman at the well, where apparently such hesitation about holy places had been expressed, a church, a holy place, should have been erected. It is a magnificently dramatic site, overshadowed by Mount Gerizim and its dark wooded slopes. The mouth of the well, the place of the conversation, is now underground, and pilgrims go down some steps into a small cave-like building with its walls covered by icons and an Orthodox priest as its guardian. There they can draw deep using the bucket which is thoughtfully provided – more than Jesus himself had – and gingerly taste the water, offering up prayers to ward off dysentery.

Then the pilgrims come back up the stairs into the main church again. These days they find themselves in the newly finished Church of St Photini[1], completed in 2007, and modelled along the lines of an earlier Crusader church on the site. However in the years when I took groups there from St George's College, as we came up the stairs from the cave into the outline of the church, we found ourselves looking around not at the ceiling of a church, but at the magnificent open sky. For the vagaries of history meant that for most of the twentieth century the church over Jacob's well was never finished: it was one of the last great efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church before the Communist revolution. When 1917 came the flow of money suddenly stopped, and for the next 80 years or so, the church remained at the point it had reached in 1917, half built, and open to the sky.

I always used to think of that as an accidental parable of holy places, of the holy city and the holy land. We have our pretensions, our efforts at grandeur at which God must laugh. We seek to honour in buildings of stone. They are good indeed so long as metaphorically they are open to the sky, lifting our gaze beyond themselves rather than shutting us in, not claiming to be the truth in themselves, but pointing us to a greater truth beyond.

Having set this scene, I now want to look at John 4.4-26 as a whole in a little more detail and see what more we can glean from it about presence – and indeed about conflict and perhaps continuity. Let's read it through…

One of the features which comes out strongly as we read the text in this way is that this is a real conversation going on between Jesus and the woman. I want you to hold on to that, and we will return to that aspect in a few minutes time.

The passage begins by telling us that Jesus is journeying from Jerusalem to Galilee, and that as verse 4 puts it, 'he had to go through Samaria'. That is likely to be more than simply a statement of geography – it was not simply a question that passing through Samaria was the shortest and most direct route between Jerusalem and Galilee. Rather, given the way that John's Gospel uses language, it is likely that we are also being told about a different 'must'… the divine 'must' of Jesus' ministry, which requires him to travel through and

[1] Photini (which means 'enlightened') is the name given in Orthodox tradition to the woman whom Jesus met at the well.

overcome places of mutual alienation. Jesus 'having to' go through Samaria prepares us for the overcoming of division between Jews and Samaritans which will be a feature of the next verses.

The weary and thirsty Jesus is sitting by a well at noon. That too is loaded language. Later in the Gospel Jesus will be thirsty once again at noon, as he hangs on a cross in Jerusalem, and shortly afterwards we will learn that the 'living water' which he promises the woman in this story will flow deep out of his own side. Throughout the Gospel of John we discover that episodes such as the one we are exploring at the moment are like signposts pointing the way to and through the Cross.

And a woman comes to draw water at noontime. The scene is being set brilliantly. In the Old Testament there is what Robert Alter calls a well-known type scene: a stranger from a foreign land comes to a well, sits down there, and then a woman who arrives to draw water takes the stranger home to meet her people, and he makes her his bride. The Gospel is deliberately – and daringly – drawing on this type scene and giving it a twist. Indeed one way of looking at John's Gospel as a whole is to suggest that it is a love story, a reworking of Genesis, in which a new and loving relationship between men and women is restored. There are plenty of hints – not least the fact that towards the end of chapter 3, only a few verses before our present passage, Jesus himself is described as 'the bridegroom'.

Of course the twist in the tale here is that the woman Jesus meets at the well is not the young and beautiful virgin of the traditional stories, but a woman used and abused in a world in which men set the rules for 'nice women'. Though the woman is not necessarily the prostitute that much Christian exegesis has made her out to be, there is enough detail given to suggest that for some reason she must have been seen as an outsider in her own community.

Whatever, the woman is amazed at the boundary crossing nature of Jesus' request to her for water – a Jewish man asking for a drink from a Samaritan woman. It is interesting to note how the conflict between Jews and Samaritans over which was the 'right' holy place for worship had fed back into what we could call conflict over the holiness of the everyday – the prohibition of sharing something as basic as a drinking vessel.

John's subtle irony also pervades the conversation of Jesus and the woman over 'living water'. For at one level the phrase 'living water' is simply the Semitic idiom for what we would call running water, in other words fresh water that comes from a spring rather than still, and possibly contaminated, water from a well. That is how the woman understands it – and that becomes the starting point for her discussion with Jesus – which then builds on from that to so much more.

But I love the fact that this important theological discussion begins from something so essential and basic to human existence as fresh water. That is indeed an appropriate starting point for theology. The spiritual needs to build on the material. And then we gradually move into the discussion about holy places, about whether God was present and to be worshipped on Gerizim or in Jerusalem.

Jesus says two things and it is important to notice them both: first that God's presence now transcends particular physical places – it cannot be limited by and to them. 'God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth.' It could almost be described as the New Testament's anti-holy place manifesto. But secondly he adds the perhaps unexpected comment: salvation is from the Jews.

I find it challenging and unexpected because of its sudden particularity. Jesus is stating that God has worked with a particular people, in particular times and particular places, and

that somehow our salvation is rooted in this. So alongside the expansive universality of 'God is Spirit' we have the contrasting particularity of 'salvation is from the Jews'. I think that the challenge of holding both assertions together lies at the heart of the paradox of the Christian faith.

There's one other thing in this passage I want to comment on and then try to draw everything together – to ask what this might mean for our understanding of presence in the context of today's Holy Land?

I expect that many of you are aware that one of the features of John's Gospel is Jesus' repeated use of the phrase 'I am' to describe himself, using an expression which, because of its perceived link to the 'I am who I am' revealed in Exodus 3, seems to be a disclosure of his divinity. And you will be familiar with the great declarations of Jesus such as 'I am the Bread of Life', 'I am the Light of the World', 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' – what I call the 'I am sayings with a predicate'. Not everybody realises however that there are a considerable number of other 'I am' sayings in the Gospel – which are sometimes half hidden by the English translation, but where in Greek Jesus is also using the same words '*ego eimi*', the emphatic 'I am', to speak about himself. And in what I will be sharing with you in the next few minutes I will be focusing on one of these hidden 'I am' statements.

When I talk with people about John's 'I am' sayings I enjoy asking people to think about which is the first 'I am' saying in John's Gospel. Some people have mentioned 'I am the Light of the World', others 'I am the Bread of Life'. I have to confess that it is with great glee that I chortle at these responses and tell people that they are wrong.

It is certainly true that 'I am the Bread of Life' in chapter 6 is the first 'I am with a predicate' in the Gospel, but in fact there are two earlier 'I am' sayings, which, although they are picked up in the marginal footnotes of many modern translations, are not immediately obvious to the English reader. The first 'I am' of John's Gospel occurs in John 4.26. In the NRSV translation it is presented as 'I am he, the one speaking with you' – but actually in Greek it is simply 'I am the one speaking with you'.

I find it an exhilarating and powerful discovery to realise that the first time that Jesus discloses this divine identity it should be to a person who is a woman, a Samaritan, who was not a member of his own religious community, and someone who was apparently ostracised among her own people. What is this telling us about the nature of God?

The disclosure comes at the end of this quite lengthy talk between Jesus and the woman, in which they have discussed theology almost as equals. In the course of their meeting, each have ministered to the other, new life has been offered, barriers have been broken and the vision of a new and deeper relationship between God and human beings, and between human beings themselves, has been opened up. And then Jesus says 'I am'.

Let me take you back again to the Old Testament for a moment: to that very point where God discloses his name to Moses. It comes during the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush, as God is seeking to persuade Moses to return to Egypt to liberate his people from bondage. Moses is more than unwilling – and thinks up excuses not to have to go. As part of his wrangling with God he points out that if he is going to tell the people that 'the God of your ancestors had sent me to you' then the people will respond in turn 'And what is the name of this God'. It is at this moment that God reveals his name. And in doing so he takes an immense risk, for in the religious world of the Old Testament to let your name be known made you vulnerable – it allowed people to control you, to bend you to their will. If that was true for human beings, how much more so for a god.

The sweep of the Old Testament makes it clear that God was very hesitant to disclose his name – for precisely such reasons. But now there is no choice; compassion for his people dictates that God must, or else his people would remain for ever slaves in Egypt. And so God makes himself vulnerable and allows his name to be known.

And yet that enigmatic phrase 'I am who I am' seems deliberately designed to preserve God's sovereign freedom; not to allow human beings to manipulate him as their puppet. The very mystery of the phrase suggests that God's name is ultimately beyond human control and comprehension. It is a name which is a different sort of name.

There is a German theologian called Walther Zimmerli who argues that this name that is no name is the thread that lies at the very heart of the Old Testament and draws it together: as Zimmerli puts it 'The God who is invoked by the name 'Yahweh' repeatedly demonstrates his freedom by dashing to pieces all the 'images' in which humanity would confine him. There are many ways that human beings can seek to confine God – we can build him a temple or a holy place and tell him to live in it, to be available as required; we can seek to insist that he becomes the mere guarantor of an inflexible moral order in which the wicked are always punished and the good are always prosperous. The people of the Old Testament tried all these – and more besides – and the story of the Old Testament tells again and again how God who is the 'I am who I am', refused to be trapped and held captive by all such neat religious systems and theologies.

I think it is no accident that Jesus' first 'I am' is embedded in a passage which speaks so extensively about the barriers that existed between Jews and Samaritans. As we have already suggested, at the time of Jesus the primary quarrel between the two communities was focused on the two temples that were the focal buildings of each faith. As the woman said to Jesus, 'Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain – Gerizim – which rises high in the heart of Samaritan territory – while you, the Jews, say that it is in the temple in Jerusalem that people need to worship God.'

So two holy places originally erected to venerate God had become focal points for hostility and division as both communities sought to possess God each on its own terms. It had become, if you like, the antithesis of allowing God the freedom to be God, to be Yahweh 'the I am who I am'. It is into the middle of this bitter strife that Jesus reveals himself as 'I am', the very revelation of this name perhaps acting as judgement upon religious communities which sought or seek to domesticate God, to claim that they and they alone had the whole truth, and who by their exclusion of others sought to limit God's freedom to act how, where and when he wishes.

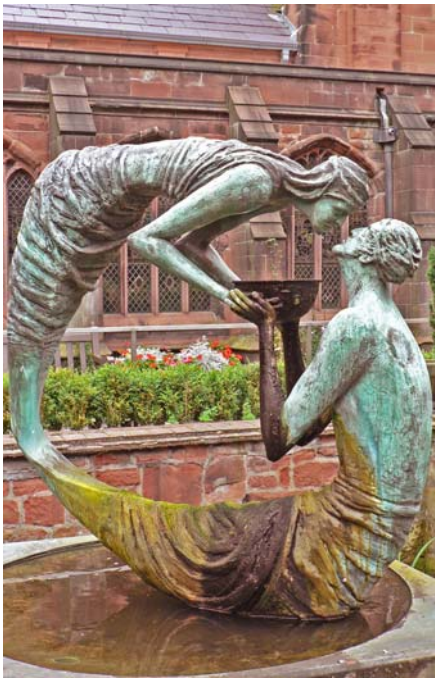
It is also no coincidence that this disclosure comes at the end of a conversation which had begun with a discussion about running or living water. For the quality of such water – just as the quality of the 'I am', is that it runs free, it is not under the control of human power. Like the Spirit of God, 'living water' will run and blow where it – rather than we – wills.

And yet, by God's grace, human beings are a central part of this story. Jesus' first words to the woman are 'Give me a drink', expressing his thirst, his need, and asking this apparently unclean woman to meet it. For many Christians in Asia, especially in India, who come from disadvantaged groups and classes and are often treated as unclean in their societies, this encounter expresses the very heart of the Christian Gospel. Significantly it is one of the most depicted gospel stories in Asian Christian art.

To be willing to receive water from another in such a culture is to show respect to the giver - to break down the barriers between the clean and unclean. So Jesus' engagement with the woman breaks the societal protocols of division and leads to a mutual liberation both

for the woman and for himself; his thirst for righteousness is quenched by his valuing of the woman.

I do not think there is a better visual expression of this truth than a statue called the 'Water of Life' which is found in the grounds of Chester Cathedral. It offers a profound depiction of the sense of mutuality and interdependence at the heart of the story. Who is ministering to whom? Surely we cannot separate out the giving and receiving – both are dependent each on the other. What a gospel we are being offered!



Water of Life sculpture, Chester Cathedral. www.flickr.com/people/jamespreston/

Each time I look at the picture it takes me deeper into this mystery. I invite you to ponder it for a few minutes while I mention something else. One of the reasons I enjoy talking to groups of people about the Bible is that often I discover fresh insights from those I am meeting with. A few years ago I was reflecting on John 4 with a group in Hereford. I had made the comment that I have also made today – about the difference in John's Gospel between the 'I am' sayings with a predicate such as 'I am the bread of life' – and these other, what I call the hidden 'I am' sayings. Then somebody pointed out that one way of translating John 4.26 could suggest that it too includes a predicate 'I am the one talking with you'. And they are quite right. So just as Jesus is elsewhere describing God as the bread of life or the light of the world and identifying himself with those realities, so here he is describing God as 'the one talking with you' – and identifying himself with that expression of divinity.

It is a powerful insight, which seems to suggest to me that the Gospel is saying that at the very heart of what it means to be God, as Jesus reveals it to us, is God's communication with humanity. It is of the very nature of God to be a God who communicates with his human creation. And this, I remind you, is the very first 'I am' of John's Gospel. So John is saying that this is the fundamental nature of God and of God's presence – upon which all the other things John wants to tell us about God in his Gospel will be based. It is John's understanding of the Logos in story.

Now… let's pull all this together and ask what it means for the theme of presence in today's Holy Land, indeed whether we can talk about 'land' or 'city' and holiness together. I want to suggest that though a surface reading of Jesus' words in John 4 seem initially to offer a sharp challenge to linking holiness to places or cities or lands, there is more that can be said.

Our Christian faith does invite us to set particularity alongside universality. An Arab Christian scholar has spoken of the importance of the 'geography of salvation'. John 4 also tells us that the material – elements such as water – are the foundation stones and building blocks for the spiritual. The passage is however also a reminder that holy places are dangerous places – they can become the sources of division and conflict, especially if and when people think that they can possess and control God's presence on their own terms. They will of course find that they are mistaken because the God in Jesus who claims the name 'I am who I am', refuses to allow himself to become a human puppet.

And yet… John 4 also with its wonderful disclosure 'I am the one talking to you' reminds us, just as does the story of Jacob and Esau, or the beautiful Water of Life fountain, that

God's presence can also be discovered in and through human interaction. And somewhere in all this is the importance of the presence of our Christian brothers and sisters who live in the Holy Land and in the wider Middle East: there is a mysterious way in which they too witness to us of God's own presence.

In July 2011, Archbishop Rowan Williams and then Archbishop Vincent Nicholls organised a conference at Lambeth Palace on the situation of Christians in the Holy Land. In his introductory remarks Archbishop Rowan also drew attention to that uncomfortable particularity at the heart of our faith: I leave you with his words:

'Christianity is a historical religion: at the centre of the Christian faith is a set of events which occurred in a particular place at a particular time… Christians are answerable, they are responsible, to what happened in the Holy Land two millennia ago; they go back to be questioned and enlarged, to be challenged and inspired, by specific events, and the connection of Christians now with those specific events two thousand years ago is a vital part of Christian faith. In that perspective, the continuity of Christian worship and witness in the places where these events occurred is not a small thing for Christian believers. It is a kind of gnosticism… a kind of cutting loose from history if we say that the presence of our brothers and sisters in the land of Our Lord does not matter to us.'[i]

Front page photo: www.flickr.com/photos/tarekzein/

[i] Archbishop of Canterbury's opening remarks at the International Conference on Christians in the Holy Land held at Lambeth Palace, July 2011. http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2135/archbishops-host-international-conference-on-christians-in-the-holy-land-opening-speeches