

THE HEART OF JERUSALEM

Sermon on 10th Sunday after Trinity Zechariah 8, 20-23

²⁰ This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, ²¹ and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.' ²² And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him." ²³ This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"

At 6:00 in the morning, the call to prayer from the famous Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem rings out. We sit in a small youth hostel in the old city, letting the smells and sounds of the city penetrate our senses. Jerusalem! Oh Jerusalem! The holy city! Jerusalem, the city of peace! Jerusalem, the city where the salvation of the world came to us humans through Jesus Christ. Anyone who has ever been to Jerusalem can confirm that Jerusalem has something special! Even though the old stones are now inhabited by numerous vendors who try to coerce you into buying some kitsch from China and the military presence is visible everywhere, the city has retained its holy atmosphere. Today holy sites are marked by aggression and hatred. And yet, Jerusalem has remained Jerusalem. Somehow, you feel all of this and cannot describe it with words. What one feels is the heart or the soul of Israel. And yet it makes one sad. For the soul or the heart seems lost.

Zechariah the prophet put into words what was incomprehensible. The heart of Israel! He foresaw that all peoples would seek this heart in Jerusalem. In Zechariah's time, such words and ideas were unimaginable, for in the world's eyes back then, Jerusalem was insignificant, trivial, and small. Yet, Zechariah was given to see far more than the realities of his time. In his prophetic vision, he saw people coming from all parts of the world. These people would not only recognize God but would open their hearts and walk hand in hand with Israel. In our time, such a vision has once again become inconceivable. Israel is indeed on the lips of all nations, but there is no nation that is heart and soul with Israel. Even though most people reacted with outrage to the terrorist attack by Hamas on the people of Israel, expressions of empathy, compassion, and solidarity were quickly drowned out by criticism of the violent actions of the Israeli armed forces, with one resolution after another condemning Israel's actions! Even in Israel, the voices against their own policies are growing stronger. For the first time, even the religious people were called to the military. These religious people now say that their prayers have carried the people of Israel up to this day. And if that is no longer possible because they must go to war, it would mean the final downfall of Israel! For the most sacred thing of Israel would be destroyed. The heart of Israel.

The prophet Zechariah looked into the future. And what he saw was indeed this heart in Israel. One can also say the driving force. Or what makes Israel Israel. The magnet that would attract all nations. And what Zechariah saw was that Israel would not be just a nation for itself but for all nations. What, then, do his words mean? And what is it that makes Israel so special and so holy to all people? And why is Israel both admired and so deeply hated?

The 10th Sunday after Trinity is Israel Sunday. On this Sunday, we remember the destruction of Jerusalem. We also think of God's enduring promise to the people of Israel. And we especially pray for the people of Israel, that they may recognize what leads to their salvation and acknowledge and confess the Savior, the Messiah, who came from their midst.

The prophet Zechariah gives us a glimpse long before the time of Jesus. When he speaks of ten men from various languages of the world grabbing the corner of a Jewish man's garment and saying, "We want to go with you, for God is with you!" he has the Jewish worship service in mind. To this day, the number ten is the minimum number of participants required for the completeness of a Jewish service. And the corner of the garment he speaks of is likely the prayer shawl of a Jewish believer. Jesus probably wore such a garment and was thus addressed as Rabbi. Zechariah, therefore, has a missionary vision here that would extend far beyond the people of Israel and encompass the entire world. And all this truly came to pass through this Rabbi Jesus: The first people to come were wise men from the Persian-speaking region. They inquired in Jerusalem about the newborn King of the Jews. Finally, they found him in Bethlehem and worshiped him. After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, many people from all languages of the world gathered again. Then Peter stood up and preached the word of God, after which these people from all languages said, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter replied, "Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." And Zechariah's prophecy indeed came true. One person went to another, and the message of Jesus went from one city to another and from one country to another. This is all the more astonishing when one considers the political realities of Zechariah's time. Zechariah recognized that the political situation was not decisive, but rather the God who stood behind it. In Zechariah 4:6, this God says, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit!" God's Spirit is the driving force. And because of this, Zechariah was able to push the political realities into the background and saw this vision, which indeed came true through Jesus Christ.

Jesus' appearance with his twelve apostles initially seemed like a total failure from a human perspective. But since Easter, it has become clear that this was exactly God's intention. Through Jesus, people would recognize God's presence. And amidst the confusion of our human history, this has remained so. What Zechariah saw with his prophetic vision was God's mission, where people would voluntarily find Jesus. This "calling mission" of God through Jesus remains unchanged to this day. And the question is, why should people come? What is the driving force? And what magnet has such an attraction that all people are drawn to it? Where has the heart of Jerusalem remained? And where can it be found today? When I look at Jerusalem today and see what is happening there, I can only see the contradictions. But I must also recognize that this has always been the case. Even in the time of Zechariah, it was so. God's salvation occurs in total contradiction to the current political events. God's sign of victory is not a political victory. No, the sign of the cross is victory over sin, death, and the devil! The victory sign of the cross is not a success program from a human or political perspective.

We do not see masses of people repenting and returning to the church. Nor do we see political power radiating from the church. And thank God that the church has no political power! Yet, God continually gives us small signals that He is on the move. People from all nations come and want to be baptized. Here and there, people also find their way back to God. People whom we believed had long been closed off to God's Word are returning. And every time someone repents or is baptized, it is a miracle of God. The fact that we are gathered here today is also a miracle of God. Because we are here, we know that God is on the move. We may lend a hand and help, as Zechariah already predicted. We may remove the obstacles in people's hearts through God's Spirit so that they can also recognize: Here I may be, here my soul may rest. For God is here.

We may visit the elderly, the sick, and the lonely. We may support them in various needs, even if it is just helping with shopping! And the little ones who have had a rough start in life, we can also welcome with open arms and hearts. Even those who are strangers and do not understand our language. People who may be despised by others, we can meet with God's love. And then we marvel that the way to Jerusalem is not far away at all. It is within us. Where God's love spreads, people recognize that God is present! And then they give us their hand and say, "We want to join you, for God is with you."

We Christians may remove the stones that seem like obstacles to many people so that they can find their way to Jerusalem. Stones of hatred, resignation, and indifference can be removed so that hearts can open. Even the smallest things bring success. And when many hands come together and each one removes a small obstacle, soon the whole road is clear. And much faster than we can imagine. We do all this because God speaks through His Spirit. And when God speaks through His Spirit, the heart opens, and Jesus is among us. Jerusalem is among us! Holy ground is among us! Amen.