

Lent Two

Read

[John 3:1–17](#)

Text and Land

This week our readings move from the Wilderness of Judea into Jerusalem, the fabled city that housed the Temple of YHWH, the God of Israel. That temple was remarkable in its time for many reasons, including its status as the exclusive temple for YHWH, the lack of divine images, and for its major refurbishment by Herod the Great. The temple drew people from far afield, and their visits made the city prosperous.

The social elite of Jerusalem were the religious leaders, chief among them the High Priest of the temple. Jesus was in deep conflict with the religious leadership of Jerusalem. He considered them corrupt and self-serving. They considered him a threat to their power and their privileges. Both were right.

Jerusalem today is many times larger than during its heyday in the Herodian period. It is also a divided city, despite attempts by Israel to annex the Palestinian neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem and create a unified city. It remains a city where privilege flourishes alongside hardship. As a general rule, Israelis and Palestinians live in mono-cultural enclaves, with each community further divided by internal religious divisions.

The holy city today is very much a contested space, with three different religions living uneasily together, and two different peoples claiming it as their capital. As Psalm 122 urges us, we pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

Questions for Discussion

- Nicodemus was a man of the establishment, yet he comes to Jesus as a spiritual seeker. How do we perceive religious leaders in our own society? Would public attitudes to religion be improved if church leaders were seen as spiritual seekers rather than directors of religious corporations?
- This passage speaks of life, new life from above, and of divine love for humankind. But it also uses dark and violent images: a plague of poisonous snakes that killed thousands of Israelites in the wilderness, and the crucifixion of God's 'only beloved son'. What sense do you make of the link between religion and violence? Is God only sweetness and light, or does our understanding of God also need to embrace darkness and suffering? How does the cross capture this ambivalence?
- Jerusalem was – and perhaps still is – the classic expression of institutional religion. How does the church as religious corporation fit with the idea (seen in [this video](#) with the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA) that we belong to a branch of the 'Jesus Movement'?

Prayer

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' (John 3.8)

"The Holy Spirit, 'giver of life', plays sax. What else? She spreads a sense of the musicality of life, building amazing improvisations on the underlying melody of the other players, warmly, freely and hopefully, to all who have ears to hear and hearts to feel." Graeme Garrett

Ask the Holy Spirit to move in the church and inspire the church to improvise.

