

**Christmas sermon
preached in the
Abbey and Cathedral Church of St Albans
on 25th December 2017
by the Bishop of St Albans**

My sermon is a tale of two cities...

... and my text is taken from today's Old Testament reading in which the prophet Isaiah addresses the first of these cities:

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels.

It's a text which sounds strangely contemporary. In recent years 440 miles of new walls have been built in Israel along the West Bank in the hope that it might provide peace and security. The so-called 'security wall' now winds its way in and around the two cities which feature in our Christmas carols – Jerusalem and Bethlehem – separating communities which have lived side by side for centuries. This Christmas once again we need to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, for at the moment there is little prospect of peace.

Meanwhile, far away on the other side of the world, President Trump is busy building a wall along the Mexican border, claiming that it too will solve problems by keeping neighbouring people apart. 'There is nothing new under the sun,' says scripture. What is clear is that down through the ages kings and politicians have spent huge amounts of money building walls.

Indeed the history of Jerusalem can be told through its walls. You can see the foundations of its earliest walls above the Siloam tunnel, near the so-called western or 'wailing' wall. They date from the time when Jerusalem was occupied by the Jebusites, a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. Since then, the city walls have been destroyed and rebuilt many times. They have suffered from earthquakes, and from the action of first the Babylonians, then the Romans and then again during the Crusades. Ironically the present walls which we see on our television screens and which are so emblematic of Jerusalem were in fact only constructed in the 16th century. They were built on the orders of a Muslim, the Ottoman ruler Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, to keep Jewish and Christian people out.

When we feel insecure, building walls seems like a good idea. Yet, impressive as they are, the massive walls surrounding the holy city of Jerusalem have done little to prevent bloodshed. Sometimes they have provided temporary protection, but invariably they were breached and the inhabitants attacked and slaughtered. Walls alone are always insufficient to provide protection.

As Isaiah reminds us, you have to guard the walls and patrol them if they are to be effective:

*Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels;
all day and all night they shall never be silent.*

But you don't have real peace and security if day and night you have to patrol the walls or sit in a control room staring at the screens of security cameras. Ironically, you can find that what you've constructed is not a safe haven but your own prison.

But let's return to Isaiah. When you read his words carefully you realise that the watchmen are not there to warn of approaching enemies. They are scanning the horizon for the coming of God's salvation, his reign of peace and justice. According to the prophet Isaiah, the walls are not there to keep people out. The people of God are not to cower behind walls, launching missiles at their enemies.

Instead, the prophet commands:

*Go through ... the gates,
prepare the way for the people; ...
build up the highway ...
The Lord has proclaimed ...
... 'See, your salvation comes.'*

The inhabitants are told to go out and repair the roads, to build up the highway, so that God can come to his people and bring peace and justice. They are to open the gates so that all may come in.

Walls designed to keep people out ultimately fail, whether it's the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall, Offa's Dyke or the Berlin Wall. Walls can provide a temporary expedience in the face of unprovoked violence, but lasting peace and prosperity require that we meet others face to face and work with them. We need to create a world in which all people are given respect and dignity. In the words of Isaiah we need to 'build up the highway', not construct more walls.

And that leads me to the tale of my second city, Bethlehem, the City of David, where the birth of Jesus takes place. What has always interested me is that, unlike Jerusalem, Bethlehem was not a walled city, but as far as we know, a hill town with no defensive walls to protect it.

This is the place where the prophets said the Messiah would be born. This is the place where God would choose to build the greatest of all highways – a living bridge between himself and humankind. As St John put it: And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

The gospel writers tell us that representatives of all humanity gather to gaze into the face of the Christ child. The first to come are shepherds. They were seen as outsiders because they worked far away from the town. They lived with their livestock: dirty, messy work which meant that they were ritually unclean. They come, they kneel, they gaze into the face of Christ. The walls are broken down, the highway is repaired; all are welcome.

Next come the magi from the East. They are foreigners, seekers after truth, representing all nationalities. They too come, kneel and gaze into the face of this child. The walls of race are broken down, the highway is repaired; all are welcome.

'It was the best and the worst of years,' says Dickens in the opening of his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. And as we look back on this year, so it is for us. Looking around the world this Christmas there is plenty to make us anxious. We listen to the shrill rhetoric of world leaders and watch the walls going up.

But today is a time for attending to the words of God once spoken by the angel to the shepherds who bids us 'fear not'. Why? Because Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem, that living bridge which unites earth and heaven, people and nations. And when we open ourselves to his transforming grace we discover the walls of fear and division within us dissolving.

This indeed is good news of great joy for us and for all the people.