

Let your merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of your humble servants

When a city has been destroyed by war or natural disaster, its former inhabitants will frequently set about rebuilding it and sometimes restoring it as best as can be, to its former glory. But it's a tough task and needs grit to do so especially once the eye of the world has withdrawn to the next Big Disaster. But sometimes, a camera crew will return some years later to see what progress has been made. Sometimes there has been a transformation from ruins to a bustling scene of regeneration and hope for the future, but in other cases, little progress can be seen, progress hampered by bureaucratic incompetence or plain old corruption.

When the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in 539BC, they found it devastated having been destroyed some 50 years earlier by Nebuchadnezzar who had forcibly relocated its inhabitants across the deserts to begin their lives as refugees in a strange land. His successor Cyrus the Great of Persia allowed those refugees who wished to return to their home and they set about the task of rebuilding the temple and the city walls.

It would have been hard and demanding work but the people were spurred on by their fundamental belief that God was with them in what they did.

Rebuilding cities demonstrates one form of human resilience. On a personal level, resilience in the face of tragedy is another and again, follows a similar trajectory, done stone by stone, house by house, street by street.

I suppose the question must be whether human society needs peace and security in which to flourish. General prosperity contributes towards making countries peaceful and secure for its citizens. Money can buy comforts but people's genuine well-being depends on their feeling noticed and nurtured. Sometimes, its framed in negative terms – freedom from evils such as pain, exploitation or oppression. Or it could be expressed positively – wellbeing through access to a functioning legal system, an honest judiciary, governance that protects democracy and free speech, accessible health care, and a military that keeps a low profile.

Isaiah reviews times of destruction and construction in his nation's history, calling to mind Ecclesiastes – “a time to break down and a time to build up” [3.3]. Which is more important to maintaining peace and security? Isaiah chooses the intuitive option: destruction is negative and construction positive. He is saying that the time of ruin is over: now is the time to build and strengthen, putting an end to instability in which peace and security can flourish.

The Hebrews passage also looks to the past and future of a nation, favouring stability and security, despite the tension in Hebrews between realised eschatology (“you have come” vv 18,22) and future eschatology “” here we have no lasting city,” vv13.14). The writer of Hebrews takes us through a number of images of our destination, to inspire us with the vision of a nation possessing security through its location, resources, fortification and finally, its people and those who govern them (a mountain, a city, a gathering an assembly, God and his Christ).

We are promised here an “unshakeable kingdom”. But can we imagine such a thing? The visionary Kingdom of the Letter to the Hebrews is the only unshakeable one in scripture. All the others have either been flawed from their inception or have flourished at their beginning and then gone on to crumble away. A good analogy for Jerusalem.

Hebrews is calling us to remember the book of Exodus and how the children of Israel had a chance to behold the awe-full presence of God. When we experience what is known as

theophany (I referred to that a couple of weeks ago when speaking of Abram's relationship with God) Hebrews says that it will not be something that can be touched. We need to tread carefully at this point to avoid heresy! Because the text is not saying that the non-physical is superior to what is physical. Our language fails us a bit at this point in trying to explain the type of touch Hebrews is alluding to – its one that suggests touching something to find out about it such as when blind Jacob touches his son to make sure he is blessing Esau; its more of a 'groping for' or 'feeling for' which suggests understanding thing by means of our physical senses.

The writer of Hebrews is trying to tell us is that what awaits us cannot be interpreting by ordinary human powers. And oddly by doing so there is no conflict with Luke's healing story in which physical touch has an unambiguously positive value. Luke is making his points about Jesus mostly through his narrative rather than using theological argument. This means that he doesn't need to provide a "how" or "why", only a "what". Luke helps us to see this pitiable woman through Jesus' eyes. Rather than appearing to be an insignificant "old woman" she is an honoured "daughter of Abraham". As with many of the healing accounts, it is her well-being and not her life that needed to be restored. By affirming that she has a place of dignity in the nation, Jesus highlights both her value as an individual and the rightness of striving for collective health and happiness.

Jesus ended her disability through touching her and immediately she stood upright and praised God. In this simple movement, touch and healing are tied together for ever in Christian history, thus celebrating a precious contribution to the peace and well-being of us all. Amen