

SPEECH OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS AT THE OPENING RECEPTION OF THE ORTHODOX- JEWISH DIALOGUE

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Some thoughts on the religious and spiritual character of Jerusalem

Your All-Holiness,

Respected Members of this Dialogue,

Dear Friends,

We greet you in the pace of Jerusalem. We thank you for this opportunity to address this gathering, and we are deeply encouraged by this initiative. We must explore every avenue to mutual trust and understanding, and to reconciliation and peace. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity is fundamental to this journey.

We would like to reflect for a few minutes on some aspects of the religious and spiritual character of Jerusalem. It will not be a surprise to you that, when we ask ourselves questions about the meaning and significance of Jerusalem, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem always begins from this perspective.

Of course, Jerusalem means many things to many people. Jerusalem is unique, and Jerusalem is universal. Jerusalem is a very concrete place, set in sacred and secular history; it

is also the object of the spiritual yearning of the great Abrahamic traditions.

It is impossible to understand Jerusalem at all without facing and wrestling with its religious and spiritual character. The earthly Jerusalem is a reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem. One cannot view Jerusalem simply from historical, archaeological, political, ethnic, or cultural perspectives. For Jerusalem holds the place that it does, precisely because of its primary religious and spiritual character, and attempts to deny or minimize this lead to inadequate understandings.

For our Orthodox Christian perspective we would say further that Jerusalem has a specifically Christian character that cannot be denied if one wishes to have a complete picture. Jerusalem has both a Jewish and a Muslim character as well, and without the fullness of this religious and spiritual landscape, Jerusalem loses its revelatory character.

For us, one of the keys to understanding the significance of Jerusalem is to appreciate the relationship between the prophetic *dabar* in the language of the Old Testament with the Incarnate Logos in the language of the New Testament. For Christians this is one continuous language of the witness of God that was made manifest in this Holy Land and in this Holy City. Just as we see the fundamental relationship between the synagogue and the Church. These aspects of Jerusalem cannot be separated.

We see this continuity both in the Scriptures and in the life of the Church. Witness the words of the Prophet Isaiah, who, in reference to Jerusalem said, "Thus says the Lord: Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion of the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

This idea is found also in the Psalms, where we read

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

Let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,

If I do not remember you,

If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

(Ps. 137:5-6)

We see this tradition carried into the tradition of the Church, most notably in the words of Saint John of Damascus, who said:

Rejoice, O holy Zion, mother of the churches and dwelling place of god, for you were the first to receive remission of sins by the resurrection.

So there is no way for Orthodox Christians to separate the Old Testament from the New.

We have seen many earthly powers come and go, but through all the changes that have affected this Holy Land, over the centuries, Jerusalem has remained as the eternal reminder of the divine-human encounter.

What is the life, what is the durability that has supported the survival of Jerusalem?

Jerusalem is for everyone. The city itself may be tiny, but it embraces the whole of humanity. And inasmuch as the divine message of the Scriptures is a message to the whole world, so Jerusalem is the embodiment of this universal message.

The Orthodox Church in general, and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in particular, takes pride in the fact that the Church is universal in its mission and its embrace. We seek to be inclusive, not exclusive, and this is seen most particularly in the role of the Patriarchate to ensure that the Holy Places are accessible to all. And accessible in a

special way, because the Holy Places are not simply archaeological sites; they are points of the ongoing encounter with the living God in prayer, devotion, and liturgical celebration.

This is how we understand the spiritual and religious significance of Jerusalem. And of course this is how we understand its mission. Jerusalem is not just a "symbol" in the modern sense of standing for some ideal, though it is certainly this. Jerusalem is the living witness to divine peace, to the divine longing for the reconciliation of all people one with the other, and with all humanity and God.

This witness is of such crucial importance in our contemporary world, in which there is a real thirst for true peace. We firmly believe that Jerusalem can be precisely the inspiration for this peace in action. As we read in the Psalms;

Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Ps. 85:10)

The challenge that we face in allowing this true religious and spiritual identity of Jerusalem to flower for the benefit of humanity is not Jerusalem itself. The challenge rests with us, our human predicament, our human weakness. These are the issues that stand between us and the true nature of Jerusalem, that joins heaven and earth.

The true character of Jerusalem should be considered to be theocentric, and not anthropocentric. The logical mistake of those who have wished to try to possess Jerusalem over the centuries has made a fundamental error of comprehension. Such an error will always lead to failure, and will always stand in the way of the ultimate flowering of Jerusalem as the true City of Peace that is its vocation.

As we consider the religious and spiritual character of Jerusalem, we cannot neglect the eschatological meaning of Jerusalem. Jerusalem serves the purposes of God and we must

bear in mind always that the earthly Jerusalem is always a reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem, a living reminder that the ultimate dwelling of humanity is the heavenly Jerusalem. And in that heavenly Jerusalem we shall be shown to be the children of Abraham together, the children of our common father. While the revealing of this great truth may seem a long time in coming, we remember that words of the Second Epistle of Saint Peter, who write that; *with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day* (2 Pet. 3:8).

Jerusalem is the undisputed dwelling place of the living God. Our message to all those who love Jerusalem and are committed to the revealing of the authentic life of Jerusalem is a call to lay aside all the human distractions and misunderstandings that impede our ability to discover and to live both in spirit and practice the true nature of Jerusalem. Such a pilgrimage will be costly and will force us to a new place of kenosis, of self-emptying. But this is the way of salvation, and this is the way to clear the path, so that the world may know anew the peace and reconciliation of this Holy City.

Once again, we welcome you. May God bless this dialogue, and may God bless all the peoples of our beloved Holy Land.

Thank you.