The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

Let's begin in Assos. (I don't mean the Turkish steak house in Crayford – though when it re-opens it is supposed to be good). I mean Behramkale, Behram as it's called by some, maybe you know it as Apollonia? Assos. Once Aristotle had an academy here, even married the king's niece and adoptive daughter, Pythias, before they had to flee the Persians. Much later St Luke and St Paul both visited here, Acts 20. I know it may seem like an odd choice but it is such a beautiful place (and there are some fantastic restaurants here too – one near the Temple of Athena will knock your socks off, if you wear socks anymore).

If we stand on top of the crag, among the ruins of the temple, we will have an amazing view all around – as far as Pergamum and across to Lesbos – and as we stand in silence and look at the beautiful island let us spare a thought for the people of the Moira Refugee Camp - let us pray for the homeless, the vulnerable and the forgotten.

So why are we here? I have brought you to Assos to talk about Robert Koldewey – actually to talk about Gates (not Bill and Melinda, actual gates), but we'll start with Robert Koldewey.

To most of you the name will mean very little or nothing at all, and for those of you with a more rarefied knowledge who recognise the name you are not likely to associate it with Turkey and colonial Classical Greece. Robert Koldewey, in the footsteps of Heinrich Schliemann, came to Assos as a young man to learn to be an archaeologist, starting a life's path that would take him on the great adventure of revealing Ancient Babylon to the world. We have come all this way to Turkey, to discuss a ruin of Iraq now in Germany, Berlin to be precise.

Have you ever seen the Ishtar Gate in the Pergamon Museum? Have you stood there and looked at all that blue glaze, thinking of the magical splendour of lapis lazuli? All those millions of bricks… And when you do stand there you are in fact only standing in front of the smaller part of a double gate, the larger part is in storage! Through this gate, the Babylonians processed into the inner sanctuary to pray for the protection of their city, for the protection of Marduk and the rains of Ishkur to water their crops - the New Year Procession (at the beginning of spring) and its 12 days of celebration at the start of the month of Nisan…walking the half mile processional route from the mighty Euphrates to the heart of power and community through the Gate of Ishtar, goddess of war and sexual attraction…praying for peace and the protection of the city. A wall plaque written in Akkadian cuneiform talks of the King being "constantly concerned with the well-being of Babylon." Well, that is what we want from our leaders, is it not? It beats, "Let them drink bleach!"

Fragments of this Processional Way are now scattered in museums around the globe - Istanbul, Copenhagen, Gothenburg, Paris, Munich, Vienna, Toronto, Detroit, New York, Chicago, Providence, Boston and New Haven and there might even be a piece on loan in London (the British Museum must have something). Now we have so many fragments in so many cities, so many cities to pray for – the protection of our fragile world in its entirety – so many tent cities, including the Moira Refuge Camp and the Jungle in Calais and all the refugee camps around the world - in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Uganda, Kenya, Chad, Cameroon, Bangladesh, the Venezuelan-Colombian border and on and on – wherever the broken and fearful gather to shelter from war and hunger but remain vulnerable to disease and abuse. I wonder if after these weeks of lockdown we understand fear just a bit better?

As so often, we seek for peace and find war – we talk of gates only to find walls.

Assos has taught us something - landscape and engineering frequently make interesting marriages. While rivers (or other bodies of water) have often formed natural borders and barriers, cities throughout history have been founded on various strategic locations and defensive positions. In earliest times this was likely to be to secure a position near sources of drinking water, food and natural resources; later the concern became (and remains) the security and control of trade routes and supply chains.

Military engineering, for all its modern technological development, remains a matter of walls and gates (and we pray, a few bridges) – even in cyber security we talk of firewalls and gateways and modern elections can still be won on loud, ugly shouts of "Build the wall!"

The earliest walls take us back to romantic places in Asia Minor like Gobekli Tepe (Urfa) and Troy (yes, almost back to Assos). Few of us can hear of Jericho without starting to sing of its famous walls; and I suppose a few of you reading this have had the opportunity to go to Uruk and the land of Gilgamesh or Babylon and the land of Hammurabi, Nebuchadnezzar II and Robert Koldewey. Of course not all walls surround cities, some defensive walls create a fortified frontier - from the times of the wars between the Sumerians (Ur) and the Amorites and later the Elamites - and some walls become part of the landscape such as the Great Wall of Gorgan ("The Red Snake"); The Long Walls of Thrace, Hadrian's Wall, and most famously The Great Wall of China. I doubt we will ever talk of the The Great Wall of Arizona.

From earliest times, Banpo or Skara Brae, the primary purpose of a wall was as it remains: for shelter and defence – to keep out the weather, the invader, bad neighbours, disease. Of course walls are also a sign of ownership – crying out for individuation, decoration, symbols of loyalty, wealth and prestige (art collectors talk of Wall Power); they can even become an art form in themselves. The thing about walls is they close in on us after a while – they are put up in fear or power thinking of what is outside but in the end it is what is inside with which we must contend. "Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter…."

So let us stand here in front of all the blue of the Ishtar Gate (sheltering in our houses we have become very aware of thresholds, boundaries and personal space, have we not?), thinking of processing forward, mindful of the pageantry of history and how little has changed since the Babylonian Captivity down to COVID-Captivity – still we fight over the lapis lazuli of Afghanistan, still we pray for the protection of cities and for refugees.

Thinking of processing forward, let us seek some hope and understanding. Let us trade this lapis lazuli for something more precious, this blue for another blue, this gate for another gate. Let us continue our imaginary journey which has taken us so far. Come with me to the Veneto – to Padova and the Chapel of the Scrovegni. (I know more bankers – Our Lady of Charity, pray for us! Saint Anthony of Padua, pray for us!)

Let us stand in front of Gioto's blue – and search out what we have come to see. We could spend a long time here in this small chapel, praying and talking of all that is here, but we are only allotted a few minutes after we have been decontaminated (an early form of social distancing to protect the art). Now where is it, this scene from the Protoevangelium of James, this scene in *The Life of the Virgin*? I think we will find it in the top tier of the south wall, yes at the end – there it is: *Joachim meets Anna at the Golden Gate*. We have come with Joachim to hear the glorious news that the Mother of Our Lord has been conceived – the Theotokos, the God-bearer is now with us – and God's plan of Salvation is revealed across generations - and we see the maternal grandparents of Jesus embrace with joy! They have not been rejected as they had feared but have been blessed by a merciful God!

So we are moved in our thoughts from Padua to Jerusalem – Yes, we have arrived at the Temple Mount, the eastern gate, the Beautiful Gate - The Golden Gate like the Ishtar Gate is a double gate – but there is an issue for us. What a journey to reach a Gate which has been walled up for centuries!

The Jews know it at Sh'ar HaRachamim – the Gate of Mercy. The Muslims know it as the Bab al-Zahabi – the Golden Gate but sometimes also known as the Gate of Eternal Life – but Muslims differentiate between the southern part, the Bab al-Rahma (mercy) and the northern part, the Bab al-Taubah (repentance). When I was in Jerusalem last year, the area behind the Gate had just been reopened for Muslim Prayers after many years. (Now, sadly, Jerusalem is empty of its pilgrims and worshippers of all three faiths.)

It is through this Gate of Mercy, according to Jewish tradition, the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) appeared – and will appear again when the Messiah comes. According to Mishnah, it is through this Gate the Red Heifer (the scapegoat) passes on the Day of Atonement – it is the Gate of the High Priest.

It is through this gate Jesus arrives on a donkey in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – being Priest, Scapegoat/Sacrificial Lamb and Messiah – bringing Salvation into the world. Today he says to us, "I am the Gate." Through him we become what we have been promised: with His death we inherit eternal life. So we are not left standing outside, isolated, rejected, abandoned – we have an invitation to enter into God's plan and fullness. We are not left partial and incomplete.

We have not come all this way to stare at walls in fear and uncertainty but to follow the Spirit, to hear the voice we recognise calling us (we, like sheep) forward to pasture – over, under and around all the walls in our way.

We started a long journey in Assos. We think of others on a much longer walk - the refugees we stopped to pray for – and continue to pray for – covering great distances in the hopes of safety, peace and hospitality. Blessed be the gracious Lord (who once was a refugee himself) who teaches us to love and leads us home. We listen to his voice – our Good Shepherd, our Gate, our Saviour.

*Lo que sé lo soporto con lo que no sé. --- Antonio Porchia*