

Taking back control?

Phil Jump sees the parallels between the current political situation in our own nations and Israel under the Roman occupation. Some of the early disciples hoped that Jesus ‘would be the one who set Israel free’. However, the message of Jesus, and Israel’s own prophets, is not so much to ‘take back control’ as to restore God’s calls to justice and equity to their rightful place in their society.

During the currency of this particular edition of FIBQ, two key festivals that feature in the Christian calendar are Easter and Ascension. Such has been the case for centuries, but as we engage with them in the current political climate, we might notice within the original New Testament narratives a common concern that not only connects them, but bears a notable resemblance to some of our present preoccupations.

One of the well-known resurrection narratives is the story of the Easter Day conversation on the road to Emmaus. Gradually an unknown stranger catches up with two bewildered travellers and reveals the deeper purposes that lie behind the events of Calvary. They eventually discover that their companion is none other than the risen Christ, causing them to rush back to Jerusalem to share the news of their encounter. Yet the conversation

begins with a statement of disappointment “We thought that he would be the one who would set Israel free” (Luke 24:21). And whatever explanations and assurances were offered en route to Emmaus, this aspiration appears to have never really left Jesus’ first followers. The question that is posed by the Apostles immediately before Jesus declares them to be “Witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” is “Will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

Behind these aspirations lie some very real and challenging political circumstances. Israel found itself bound into a pan-European empire with its centre of power in Rome. For many this was portrayed as necessary for cohesion and stability, but for those with a sense of deeper national identity this was both an affront and a source of despair. This was particularly the case for Jesus’ compatriots whose

religious identity was rooted in their inheritance of a land that had now been reduced to a Roman colony.

Few were satisfied with the status quo, causing many to rehearse those Scriptures that portrayed the coming of a Messiah whom they expected would enable them to “take back control” and reclaim their national sovereignty. And so, as his followers increasingly recognised Jesus as fulfilling this promise, their expectations were inevitably fuelled that he would indeed restore their nation to its former political greatness – at the very least being able to operate independently of Rome, if not taking its place as the dominant superpower of the region.

We might assume that behind these conversations and questions lay not only a set of expectations and assumptions, but a growing sense of frustration that these expectations were not being fulfilled.

