

The outcry over the threat to an ancient Syrian city by IS jihadists has raised concerns that the world cares more about saving old buildings than human lives. Yet if the city is destroyed, a vital link in our historical story of diversity, trade, religious tolerance and culture will be broken forever **By NADIM NASSAR**

## The stones remember

UNESCO describes the ancient city of Palmyra as “An oasis in the Syrian desert...the monumental ruins of a great city that was one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world.” They go on to list its unique and wonderful buildings, calling them “an outstanding illustration of architecture and urban layout at the peak of Rome’s expansion in and engagement with the East.”

Palmyra speaks to us from the mists of history; its ruins still boast temples and archways, colonnades, an aqueduct and all you would have found in a leading city from the classical world. Today, however, it finds itself making history again. Its fall to the so-called Islamic State (IS) jihadists has highlighted the question that so many have asked, especially through social media: why is the world so alarmed about the possible destruction of some old buildings, when thousands of lives are lost every day in the Middle East while the world does nothing?

The stones of Palmyra by themselves are worthless: their importance lies in the story they tell about people. This is true of every archaeological site and every antiquity. The stones tell us that many religions and cultures once lived side by side in this city, a literal historical and cultural oasis in central Syria, and that this was a great centre for trade between Europe and Asia. There are churches, synagogues and temples close together. Walking through the streets, surrounded by hundreds of columns, you find yourself in the presence of great history - here was a city rebuilt by King Solomon (II Chronicles 8:4), the capital of a magnificent trading empire ruled by the young Queen Zenobia, and a place visited by the Emperor Hadrian, who renamed it Palmyra Hadriana.

If PALMYRA is lost, then never again will we be able to take this particular walk through our own history - because this city offers us nothing less than part of the story of the world, and every time we lose a historical place we are losing part of our identity as human beings. Why would IS bother to attack and destroy somewhere like Palmyra - or the ancient cities of Iraq, such as Nimrud and Hatra, or the museums of Mosul?

Young Muslims are being brainwashed by the extremist religious and political leaders of IS to believe that every religious and cultural artefact that is not Islamic belongs to al-Jahiliyah - “the age of ignorance” - and that Islam came to eradicate every trace of this age. By erasing those traces, they want to erase the story itself and the memories of the people. If we imagine that Palmyra has been erased

from history, then its story will fade into a distorted, romanticised fantasy. As we lose our ancient treasures, we lose parts of our history and our own identity.

When we protect our ancient places, we protect the story of who we are. History is a massive tapestry: when a thread breaks, the image is marred and the tapestry can start to unravel. A city like Palmyra should be a unifying factor for the people of Syria, not because of the stones, but because of the meaning of this kingdom, the resilience of Zenobia, the greatness of the architecture, the achievements of the Palmyran people. This is all part of the story of the people of Syria - and of the whole world.

Artists and historians are finding a link between the funerary portraits of the women of Palmyra and Byzantine iconography. My friend Nizar Sabour, one of the most significant artists in Syria, found his visit to Palmyra so inspiring that he started Icons of Palmyra, a project linking the funerary art of the city with the birth of Christian iconography, and even modern iconography. If the stones are scattered, this sort of inspiration will be lost forever.

As Sabour told me: “Palmyra itself cannot be repeated. If we lose it, we lose a unique story of a local kingdom that said ‘no’ to the world power of its time, the Roman Empire, and developed its own culture that reflected its special place between East and West.”

Today, more than ever, we need to learn from Palmyra that there is a harmony to be found in the great diversity of faiths and cultures that once existed there - which is, of course, exactly what the IS terrorists want to destroy. They want to impose an artificial monoculture upon Syria and Iraq in place of the astounding diversity and richness that have always been a symbol of the Middle East. We must never overlook the power of the story. Our faith as Christians is based on the story of our Lord Jesus Christ. The stories of Palmyra, of Giza, Jerusalem, Damascus, Athens and Rome should be preserved for humanity for ever; to preserve these stories, we need to do all that is possible to preserve the places.

Our young need to be educated to respect our history, and to be able to interpret the great places of the world and the human stories behind them. Only by respecting our memories can we truly progress as a species that seeks peace and prosperity for countries, cultures, faiths and lives.

