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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Pathways to Peace for the Holy Land

June 2019

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Recently I returned to the Holy Land for the seventh time in 30 years and spent three months living in Jerusalem with a 23 strong interdenominational group from the USA, UK, Australia and Ireland at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute. The program involved lectures, field trips, daily shared prayer and extensive travel throughout the country meeting with different groups and individuals from Jewish settlers to Bedouin desert dwellers and included several days in the monastery of St.Catherine in Sinai, Egypt. We witnessed and listened to peoples fears and stories of the injustices they have endured or still suffer in the land of Christ's birth leading us to reflect on the possibilities for lasting peace in this outwardly strong but inwardly uncertain society. The various encounters and insights suggested four pathways towards a more peaceful future that could be briefly sketched in this short article as;

1. Revisiting the holy Scriptures and God's pathway to peace through love, mercy and justice.
2. The importance of language in peacemaking.
3. The development of a Palestinian liberation theology.
4. The pathway of the 'Tent of Nations' and its refusal to see the 'other' as an enemy.

REVISITING THE SCRIPTURES

In so many ways the world has failed the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 followed their historical rejection and near annihilation as a people and their unwavering belief that the Scriptures reveal God's political, geographical and religious intentions for his people. There was also a collective and well earned sense of guilt from the international community at our moral failures in their regard but tragically this guilt was compounded by a further failure to recognise the rightful place of the Palestinian people in the land they too inhabited and called home and who were now being evicted and persecuted. As

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Fr. David Neuhaus SJ describes it; *“The Holocaust and Naqba – the forced expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians in 1948 – are two tragedies that are at the root of the mess we are in. I cannot believe that the world is so silent.”*

Fr. Jamal Khader, a softly spoken doctor in dogmatic theology and former director of the Latin Seminary in Beit Jala, Bethlehem who was born in a Palestinian village and is now parish priest of Ramallah the Palestinian capital on the West Bank said; *“The first thing we need to say is that God is a good loving God. We can’t accept the suffering of the Palestinian people as part of God’s loving plan. No more than we can accept the exclusion of the Jewish people for so long as part of that plan. We have to read the Scriptures in an inclusive way because justice and inclusiveness are important for us. In the Emmaus story Jesus explained the scriptures to the disciples - he can explain the Bible and the place of the land to us. When we speak of peace and justice and negotiation - we never want to have justice at the expense of the other. A few months ago the Knesset declared Israel a Jewish state for the Jewish people. A state should be for all its people. Justice, peace and reconciliation is what is needed for the Palestinian people.”*

Jewish feminist Debbie Weissman whose bestselling autobiography *‘Memoirs of a Hopeful Pessimist – A Life of Activism Through Dialogue’* (KTAV Pub. 2017) suggests that we try and distinguish the land of Israel from the state and government of Israel. Palestinian narrative today, she remarked, is troubling because it suggests that Jews have no ties with the Temple or the land of Israel. Could it not be, she suggests, that both have ties? *“The truth is that the best fulfilment of Zionism is two states living in harmony side by side. We cannot have the right to a state of Israel and deny that right to others – we can support both. That doesn’t mean we support a particular government or its policies.”* Recent Church statements reminds us and the rest of the world that the answers to the situation in Israel are not found in the Bible but in international law. In his recent joint statement with Morocco’s leader King Mohammad VI, Pope Francis stated that Jerusalem belonged to all and must be promoted as a world patrimony, a city of peace. Revisiting the Scriptures together would offer a more hopeful vision for the many Israelis and Palestinians who seek a better future.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

David Neuhaus SJ whose Jewish origins, journey to Christian faith and priesthood gives him a special insight into the Byzantine complexities of life in the Holy Land believes we can all become

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involved in the proclamation of truth and justice through the language of love. We can use the words Bible, Jew or Muslim in the wrong way – even venomously and David Neuhaus suggests that Muslims are now spoken of in the same way that Jews once were, collectively, even dismissively. He concludes; *“We need to purify our language and not fall into the traditional way that we have spoken about Jews or others. There is no future in the region without finding dialogue. The sensibility we’re developing with Jews in that regard is not paralleled with Muslims. The world needs to address the occupation of Palestine. The whole stability of the region has been shaken by the establishment of the state of Israel. If we do not deal with the catastrophe of the Palestinian people over the past 70 years - we will never be at peace.”* Neuhaus claims that one of the greatest challenges in a time of conflict is for Christians to develop a language that can say what the Church wants to say, facing the enormous threats that assail Christians today from every side; *“The complexity of the Church’s position obligates those who speak in the Church’s name to cultivate a language that can promote the values of the Gospel and remain true to the diversity that the Church represents. This is not the challenge of using a diplomatic language that transcends issues but rather a language that can help transform reality and point to a better future. This is perhaps the Church’s most important contribution to peacemaking. At the same time, the Church can demand full rights for all in the Holy Land and can promote dialogue with all, Jews and Muslims, religious and secular. Words create worlds and creative, peacemaking words in a world of violence and war can open the horizons beyond which lies a better future.”*

A PALESTINIAN THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Liberation theology has often been presented as being ‘against’ some group or thing. Fr. Jamal from Ramallah insists this would not suit the situation in the Holy Land. *“Our own theology means looking at the reality on the ground, applying the word of faith, presenting the word of love. Our answer is a non-violent resistance to the occupation. The occupation is a sin and we fight the sin. Only peace can give Israel security. By working to end the injustice against Palestinians we also work for the peace of Israel.”* In seeking a solution he eventually attempts to answer his own question; *“We are living in a one state solution where Israel controls everything. It is to all intents and purposes an apartheid state. Inside the Palestinian state – the West Bank which hardline Israelis want to annex – there are two legal systems, road systems, one for Palestinians one for Jews. One of the options we have as a*

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small country is that we could have a bi-national state. We could have two ministers for culture. Federation is another possibility. We already have found concrete ways to work together and cooperate on agriculture, on the environment, water, security, business. Can we live together? I believe that once we arrive at a just solution – whatever that is, then we can. Israel does not have a constitution – we need one where all are equal.”

Today many feel that political leadership among Palestinians is weak with no outstanding charismatic personalities to make the case for Palestine abroad. Other Arab states are more interested in keeping Iran at bay and support Israel, ignoring the Palestinians plight. Fr.Jamal concluded; *“Palestinians do have friends however among the international solidarity movement and others who support them which gives us hope. The force of life is stronger than that of death. We do not want to be trapped in an endless struggle, we do not have violence in our DNA.”*

REFUSING TO BE ENEMIES

On a hilltop south of Bethlehem lies a farm that has been in the hands of its owners family for generations. Daoud Nassar, a Lutheran Palestinian whose grandfather had the rare foresight to register his land over 100 years ago, has been fighting almost his entire life to retain the beautiful olive groves, hillside terraces and pastures that mean so much to him and his family. With outside support – including solidarity from moderate Jewish opinion within and outside Israel – he has battled through the courts to hold on to his property. He has been attacked, his olive trees poisoned and the entrance to his lands blocked. Without stated reason the government refuses to allow him the building permits required for a house on his land. Until he installed solar panels and became adept at harnessing rainwater he had no electricity, no water. He and his family then dug underground and live in a series of caves. Yet a large stone at the entrance to his property states in chiselled letters; *“We refuse to be enemies.”* Daoud a devout Christian and an extremely charismatic and articulate individual believes he can make a difference and contribute to other such situations around the world by resisting injustice; *“creatively, positively and non-violently.”* He wants to use their own system to defeat them. In 2001 the ‘Tent of Nations’ project (www.tentofnations.org) began making the farm a place to host different kinds of activities for young people through which they could learn the art of peacemaking. Building bridges of hope, understanding and reconciliation are the goal of the project and although legal difficulties continue and the army, without a court order, bulldozed hundreds of his fruit trees

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in 2014, Daoud continues to persevere and pray and says that he will never give in, “*Our land is like our mother. We care for her. We won’t sell her. We will never leave her alone.*” His answer to the frustrations and disappointments are not to become embittered but to transform those negative experiences into the energy needed to do things positively.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

How can we on the outside assist peace? All sides want us to visit them; for Israel it helps the economy, for Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, economic benefits may be limited but signal our awareness, concern and solidarity with them. Organise a parish pilgrimage! Despite its image as a seriously troubled part of the world the shrines and holy places continues to attract pilgrims – a record 4 million visitors in 2018. It is also probably the greatest catechetical tool that could be implemented by a parish pastoral group with real potential for revitalising young people’s interest through issues of social justice, ecology and liturgy. My own former parish of Tallanstown, Reaghstown and Clonkeen in Co.Louth have run annual walks to provide medical help for the poorest of Gaza in recent years. The Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) is bringing together thousands of Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews. If the international community renews its fundamental, moral obligation to assist the process of justice, peace and reconciliation it will give courage to those struggling for peace in a place that is sacred to so many friends of Israel. Think radically, speak carefully and act positively. Listen, reflect, pray and act. The worst thing would be to do nothing.

True Education. All too often we are conditioned by trivial and fleeting models of life that drive us to pursue success at a low price, discrediting sacrifice and inculcating the idea that education is not necessary unless it immediately provides concrete results. No, education makes us raise questions, keeps us from being anaesthetised by banality, and impels us to pursue meaning in life. We need to reclaim our right not to be sidetracked by the many sirens that nowadays distract from this pursuit

– POPE FRANCIS, *Christ is Alive*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 81.