

Making good

Thank you for inviting me, through David Tatem, to share my experiences in Palestine with you. This is a good Sunday, just before Lent begins, to reflect on a situation that is terribly wrong and to think about taking steps to make it right. Before we make our own peace with God, as in our Matthew reading, to make peace - or to begin - in Palestine.

Why did I go? On a Jewish/Christian visit with the Council of Christians and Jews in May 2016, when I was URC minister at the London Inter Faith Centre, I heard that in Ramallah there was a large statue of Nelson Mandela with a quote of his - *We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.* I started to make connections between apartheid in South Africa and the situation between Israel and Palestine now. I was privileged to have a pre-retirement sabbatical in South Africa and to meet people (older people!) who'd been active in the fight against apartheid, and to think about it some more. I looked for opportunities to make an in-depth visit to Palestine and in October went on a delegation with Christian Peacemaker Teams. CPT has had trained peacemakers present in Hebron in the West Bank for 25 years and the purpose of the delegation was to introduce participants to the situation, to allow us to meet people active in making change in non violent ways, and to give us a chance to shadow the on-the-ground team. We were a group of six, with two leaders, one of whom was fluent in Arabic.

What follows is what I learned, and what it meant for my faith - and for the rest of my retirement years!

I'd been to Israel and Palestine before; I'd spent ten days at the museum of the Holocaust; I'd been on a mixed visit with Jews and Muslims. But this visit brought home to me that what's going on is an occupation, not just a 'conflict' and that there is a huge disproportionality in strength between Israel and Palestine. The inexorable – but illegal in international terms – growth of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the infamous wall, heavily guarded checkpoints everywhere, Israeli-only roads, the taking of Palestinian land for military purposes have all, quite visibly, pushed Palestinians into increasingly small pockets of land for habitation, pockets that are isolated from each other. Palestinians are increasingly cut off from the farmland they need for their livelihood, from their place of work, from family members in other parts of Palestine, from access to hospitals.....

It became clear to me that Israel wants the land – all of it – without the people who have lived there for centuries; that it has the power, if not the right, to take it, and that nobody is stopping it.

Here's one example. One day, towards the end of a fairly uneventful going-to-school-time checkpoint duty with a CPT volunteer in Hebron, she received a call asking her to call in at Macphelah House on the way home. In Hebron, unlike most other places in the West Bank, the Jewish settler population lives side by side with the old Arab population. Macphelah House is at the end of a row of traditional Arab houses-cum-workplaces. It has stood empty until last June, when settlers moved in and put up banners and Israeli flags. That morning the settlers had prevented a Palestinian from entering, not Macphelah House, but the Palestinian property. The army were called. What did they do? Far from re-establishing the Arabs' right of way, they put a barrier around the settlers' house and left four heavily armed soldiers guarding it. The Palestinians were left huddling by the next doorway down.

Israeli military presence is everywhere. The case of Ahed Tamimi just recently has drawn our attention to the hopeless fury of many young Palestinians. CPT is committed to non violent means of dealing with conflict, but I can't help but share that anger. We met Gareth Horton and Selma of Military Court Watch, visited the courts, heard the stories of anguished parents waiting in the courtyard, and watched the lumbering court proceedings (or lack of them - nearly always it was a deferral). One of the ways of keeping the illegal settlers safe is by keeping Palestinians in the West Bank intimidated. Soldiers will enter a village at night, remove the door of a house, take away a teenage boy handcuffed and blindfolded, keep him hours before questioning in the morning, extort confessions and other information that, obtained under extreme pressure, may or may not be accurate, keep a child in detention for months, release him, to a village where he may be too traumatised to settle back into schooling and may be ostracised because others believe he has given away names of fellow villagers.....So the whole community lives in terror. Military law applies in these areas, but even under its stipulations much of the way it's being implemented is illegal.

Not just a conflict. Not, despite what the media here often suggests, an equal conflict. More like any colonial occupation of the home of another people by a power that can get away with it.

I learned how the anger and despair of the Palestinians under occupation is channelled by many into positive and creative resistance. *Sumud*, they call it. It means something like long-suffering or patience. It's the way they have of nurturing their way of life - land, culture, tradition - while trusting that in the long run what is theirs will be restored to them. For us visitors, this was often joyful. We experienced Palestinian hospitality in homes and sometimes in Bedouin tents. We witnessed part of a dance festival - a wedding dance that wove its way through the streets of East Jerusalem. We bought beautiful embroidery to take home. We visited a traditional Palestinian house that had become a museum. We were welcomed everywhere. *Yes, we could take pictures. Yes, we could use names. Yes, would we please tell people back home what was going on.* Although our hosts would often look at me as the only Britisher in the group, shake their heads and say 'Balfour!' or 'Blair!' there was much gracious gratitude for our presence and our interest.

More seriously, we also visited farmers whose land or home was under threat. Sometimes this was from the military; sometimes from illegal settlers encroaching on their land. (All settlements have been declared illegal by the UN; there are some, where a group has squatted on the land, that even Israel regards as illegal). We met Sheikh Mahmoud in the Jordan Valley, heard how an illegal settler had forced the villagers off their grazing land and how, with help from an Israeli organisation called ICAHAD (Israeli Campaign Against House Demolitions) he had encouraged the villagers to walk together and reclaim their land, little by little. A small victory!

And - a very small example of Sumud, that moved me very much. Tzaliha is an activist in Al Khalil (Arabic for Hebron) who runs a nursery but also works with young people. She trained them in how to behave at checkpoints; how to speak to the soldiers politely but firmly, what their rights are..... so empowering them, lessening some of the feeling of helplessness, helping them claim their dignity.

And so I came home, at the end of October, to a flurry of events and news items around the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. I was only too conscious of the contribution my nation has made in the past to the current toxic impasse. We keep it in place, even, by failing to insist that international law be implemented. I feel responsibility as a British person; and of course I feel a special draw to seek a just peace in the land where my saviour walked and talked, lived and died. I think that the appropriate Christian response is to begin to make atonement for this institutional sin. I learned the use of the word 'atonement' from Phil Cousineau, an American who has done much work on forgiveness and argues that making good is the task of BOTH offender and victim in a situation where there has been hurt or trauma. That makes a lot of sense to me; a lot more sense than apportioning blame in a world in which none of us is wholly innocent and few wholly inexcusable.

Our pre-Lent readings encourage us, not to exculpate ourselves from the offence given to God (in Micah) or another person (in Matthew), but to turn, listen to the accusation, and to seek to make good. To *do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. To be reconciled to our brother and sister.*

For me, that means staying involved, talking about what's going on as much as I can, revisiting if I possibly can, praying - until a tipping point comes and peace is possible.

For all of us, as we step into Lent, it might mean that we examine ourselves, not so much for the minor unkindnesses and greeds and carelessnesses of our doubtless generally ethical lives, but for the way our wellbeing rests on ignoring the plight of others, whether in Palestine or in poorer nations across the world, or on our own streets or in care homes and restaurants or any public building cleaned by people whose pay leaves them struggling for the basics of a decent life. And that we act on what we discover.

I wish you a Lent that is full of new insights and of the beauty of working to make good.