

Jesus Christ Liberator – Then and Now

Facing the Legacy of Injustice

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center is preparing for its 10th international conference next year. The dates are Tuesday, March 7 to Sunday, March 13, 2017, in two different venues, Bethlehem, Palestine and Tiberias/Nazareth, Israel.

The conference will address several crucial and relevant issues facing our world in general, the whole of the Middle East, as well as the Palestinian people in particular.

Therefore, we begin this introductory rationale with a big welcome to every one of our friends. We would love to have you join us. Come and bring your friends. It will be a great encouragement to have you with us.

As many of you know, Sabeel has been able, over the years, to address many pertinent issues including that of Jerusalem, Christian Zionism, Jubilee, Palestinian Christianity, the Bible, and many others. In our 10th international conference we hope to do the same by looking at some of the pressing issues that challenge and threaten the very existence of our people. To confront and address these issues is an essential part of our faith and commitment to both oppressed and oppressors. We must take seriously the words of Christ to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

We are at a major crossroad: What are some of the issues that we need to address?

FIRST: The Legacy of Arthur Balfour

We will bring to remembrance one hundred years since the Balfour Declaration. We still suffer from its ramifications. The atrocities that ensued exceeded our worst fears. The Nakba of 1948 was only the beginning of endless Nakbas that wreaked disasters on our people. To what extent did Balfour's entrenched Christian Zionism influence his political decision? The Balfour Declaration was certainly the first spark that the Zionists needed to launch their unending and unrelenting vicious scheme against the Palestinian Arabs. With the benefit of hindsight, we need to take a deep and penetrating look at the extent of the tragedy that befell our Palestinian people due to Balfour.

And it is not over. It will be important to take a look at the ideological development of extreme religious settlers and their agenda. Tragically it has become amply clear that the United States' Administration and Congress have been totally crippled by forces that are blindly supportive of Israel; while the United Nations has been agonizing over Israel's violations but powerless to implement its own resolutions. We look to our friends from Britain who have done the research so as, together, we reflect on the last 100 years and its impact on our people today. The basic question is: What role can Britain in particular play to rectify the injustice?

SECOND: The Threat of Religious Extremism

Appallingly, religion has become part of the problem in today's world. Every one of our religions is imperiled by internal extremist elements. The authentic religious message has become clouded and endangered.

Christianity, in many instances, has regressed from the way of Jesus Christ to a closed theology and biblical fundamentalism that has turned it into an obstacle in the way of a just peace.

Judaism has been hijacked away from its ethical values by Zionist ideology that places more value on land than people or peace, and that threatens the very existence of Palestinian Arabs. Militant messianism among settlers constitutes a threat to peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis.

Islam itself is facing the menace of the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). Undoubtedly, extremist militant Islam did not arise from a vacuum. The roots of the problem and the responsibility for it lie, to a great extent, on the way the western powers devastated and humiliated Islamic countries through colonialism and imperialism. At the same time, political militant Islam is problematic and needs to be addressed.

Again, it is our faith mandate that compels us to take a penetrating look at what is happening. ISIL's radicalism and extremism not only threaten the Christian presence in the Middle East, they threaten the presence of many mainline and progressive Muslims who are adamantly opposed to such extreme ideologies. We hope that our friends from the "Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding" at Georgetown University as well as local scholars will help us unravel some of the current difficulties. How can we as Christians and Muslims, locals and internationals, work together in solidarity to face the challenge?

THIRD: Jesus Christ Liberator

Of great concern in today's world are "the principalities and powers" that are pulling countries and people apart in our region. How can our faith help us to remain strong and steadfast? How can Jesus Christ as liberator guide us and inspire us to continue to witness for justice, peace, and reconciliation? This is important for many people and in particular for our diminishing Palestinian Christian community as it navigates its life under occupation and as it reflects penetratingly at the challenges before us.

Again we call on our friends to come and join us in this important conference. Your presence gives us hope and encouragement as together we continue on the path of peace and justice.

Naim Ateek
Chair, Sabeel Board
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