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“Unto us a child is born”

*For a child has been born for us,
A son given to us;
Authority rests upon his shoulders;
And he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
And there shall be endless peace...
With justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore*
(Isaiah 9:6-7)

This passage of the prophet Isaiah is a song of liberation and joy. Christians have interpreted it as a reference to the birth of Christ. It is certainly one of the most beautiful poems of the Old Testament.

In its original context in life, this poem had to do with the overthrow of an oppressive occupation. It was probably written in the aftermath of an Assyrian invasion of parts of east Jordan that extended to the coastal region of the Mediterranean Sea. The inhabitants were totally subjugated and oppressed. Isaiah describes them as living in thick darkness, anguish, and gloom.

It is worth noting that our region of the world has always experienced invasions and conquests from the dominant powers of the times. In fact, Palestine has always, geographically, resembled a corridor. It was a thoroughfare for people crossing from north to south and vice versa. It linked Egypt, the major power in the south with the successive empires of the north. Conquerors passed through it and had to subdue and control it.

In this specific beautiful poem, Isaiah envisions an end to the Assyrian occupation of the land. All the instruments of war will be burned by fire and a new divinely gifted king will reign. He will end the violence and establish a kingdom of peace based on truth and justice. For Isaiah as for many people throughout history, the possibility of peace has always been present in the imagination and dreams of human beings. Why cannot people live in peace? Why do they have wars? Why do so many people have to be killed? This poem lifts up the hope for a new day when, after the occupation has ended, the new king will be recognized as the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace”. In other words, he would possess all the essential qualities and abilities to bring an

end to war and to usher a permanent peace and prosperity.

Such a vision of “endless peace...with justice and righteousness...forevermore” was never realized, neither in Isaiah’s time nor at any other time, in the history of the world since it has to be based on the power of arms, violence, and destruction. Christians believe that the vision of an enduring peace came closest to its actualization in the coming of Jesus Christ. His birth was, indeed, the non-violent entrance of God into the world. Circumstantially, Jesus came into a world similar to that which Isaiah described. Isaiah was referring to an Assyrian occupation. Jesus was born under a Roman occupation when people were also longing for liberation and peace.

It is important to emphasize that there is nothing called a benevolent occupation. No matter how benign any occupation claims to be, it is unacceptable and undesirable by the occupied. This is the way it was in the time of Isaiah as well as in the time of Jesus, and it is still the same today for the Palestinians; except, maybe, for a few weak souls who have been co-opted by the occupying regime and have become collaborators with it and beneficiaries of it. Most people, however, long for liberation as, indeed, do the Palestinians who long to see the end of the oppressive yoke of Israel. Yet most people think of liberation as being possible only through military might. For the prophet Isaiah, the potential of real peace lies in the reversal and abrogation of war when people “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”(Is 2:4).

Some of us believe that this vision of peace is achievable for Israelis and Palestinians today. What needs to happen is for Israel to lift its oppressive domination and end its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and accept the resolution of the conflict on the basis of international law and not on its own laws. On the one hand, the government of Israel is literally crushing the Palestinians until they

succumb to its own demands for peace by accepting further land concessions. On the other hand, the Palestinian resistance is using all the means and methods available to it to insist on international legitimacy based on UN resolutions. Obviously, since Israel is by far much stronger militarily we continue to witness the total suppression and destruction of the Palestinian people.

Isaiah’s vision for peace is realistic but conditional. It demands of both the Israelis and Palestinians to “...beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks [neither] nation shall...lift up sword against nation, neither shall...learn war any more”. Such conditions must apply equally to both the Israelis and Palestinians and not to the Palestinians alone. If Israel is asking the Palestinians to disarm for the sake of a permanent peace, is it willing to do the same for the sake of the same objective? This is the revolution that Isaiah was talking about. Many of us would love to see it happen. Unfortunately, the history of nations and individuals has always been a history where people learned the art of war and violence.

Even the psalmist praises God for his military training, “Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle....”(Psalm 144:1). Twenty years ago, when I was serving the church in Haifa, a church member told me about a conversation he overheard between two Israeli women. One was asking the other why she had not seen her for quite sometime. She replied, “I gave birth to a soldier”. This woman was so proud to have given birth to a son who will grow up to be a soldier. Sadly, we still live in such a mentality of war.

All of us constantly observe the birth of innocent children who grow up to become dictators, war criminals, or presidents and prime ministers who spend huge budgets on the production, purchase, and accumulation of arms, and who teach and practice war. We daily witness the presence of young Israeli soldiers oppressing the Palestinian people. They, like

many others, have been trained in the skills of war. At this Christmas season, as our thoughts turn to the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem where Jesus was born, Bethlehem is practically a closed military area. In spite of the Israeli army assurances that Bethlehem will be opened for Christmas, the facts on the ground reveal the opposite. The Palestinians, except for few hours during the day, are confined to their homes by Israeli military orders. Everything around and inside Bethlehem connotes violence and injustice against Palestinians. The young soldiers are in their tanks and armored cars patrolling, oppressing, and dehumanizing others and in the process being themselves dehumanized. All of this is totally foreign to the spirit of Christmas; and is a basic contradiction with the beauty and innocence of the birth of any child let alone the birth of Jesus Christ “the prince of peace”.

The evangelists writing the biography of Jesus from the vantage point of his death and resurrection could say that his birth, in actual fact, fulfilled the prophecy or dream of Isaiah in a more perfect way (Matthew 1:21; 4:14-16). Jesus’ coming into the world was the nonviolent coming of God. For the first time, a child grows up and walks the way of love and nonviolence; and although he suffers at the hands of violent people, he keeps pointing clearly to the possibility and viability of a life of peace and love.

Indeed, the truest expression of our humanity is found in children, in the birth of every boy or girl. To stay in touch with our humanity and hold on to it we must look at young children. Before they begin to learn, or more correctly, before we begin to teach them racial discrimination, prejudice, hate, violence, or the ugly art of war, they reflect our truest nature. The difference that Jesus Christ has brought through his birth is precisely the fact that he did not lose the essence of his true humanity. In order to hold on to our humanity, we must not walk the way of this world, the way of empire, the way of violence but to follow the way of Jesus Christ, the way of fidelity to God through the path of nonviolence and peace.

It is also possible whether we are Christians or not, to learn from children. Jesus recognized this when he said, “...unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Jesus made children a model of the kingdom “...Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). Unless we become like them in simplicity, humility, ability to forgive and trust, we cannot be members of God’s kingdom. This is the nature of God’s kingdom. The children become our model. We must mirror them.

For the sake of children, we must change. The greatest tragedy of our every day life in Israel/Palestine today happens whenever a child is killed, whether Palestinian or Israeli. Every time we kill a child, we murder the truest expression of our humanity. And the more we get used to killing children, the more savage and brutal we become against each other. This is the worst of crimes because gradually and inevitably we lose our own humanity. Every time the crime is repeated, it points to the malady of our world.

Jesus has pointed out the way of nonviolence. Dare we follow it? At this Christmas, in the midst of the violence of the occupation and the violence of the resistance to it and the cycle of violence that continues to escalate, we are reminded again of the nonviolent coming of God in Jesus Christ. Dare we follow the way?



For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...and there shall be endless peace...with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore....”

Is. 9:6-7

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Waiting Patiently An Advent Reflection

Advent is a season which engenders many questions about what faithful discipleship implies in our world today. What does it mean to prepare for Christ's second coming? What does it mean to wait for God's fulfillment of creation? What does it mean to announce that salvation is at hand? What does it mean to proclaim joy in a world torn apart by hatred, injustice and conflict? What does it mean to prepare yet again for Christ's birth?

This Advent I've pondered such questions while living under 'house arrest' with the whole Palestinian community in the greater Bethlehem area. Today marks the twenty-first day of the fourth time this year the Israeli military has imposed a 24-hour/day, day after day, curfew in the city. Life has come to a halt once again. No schools are in session. No businesses are functioning. No banks are open. Even worship is prohibited. Baptisms, weddings, funerals, memorial services - everything is on hold. To be on the street, whether to reach a doctor, to attend to prayers, to buy bread, is an 'illegal' act.

Rev. Sandra Olewine

United Methodist Liaison - Jerusalem

Everyone is made to feel like a 'thief,' when the most basic needs can only be met by sneaking around corners, running down empty streets, creeping through fields, looking over one's shoulder - hiding from Israeli soldiers, armored personnel carriers and tanks. Under such conditions, the Advent theme of 'patiently waiting' has taken on heightened new meaning for me.

For some Christians, Advent waiting means attending to one's personal spiritual life, seeking to keep one's self in tune with God while letting the world outside go on its merry way, trusting that God will take care of it in God's own time. At times, this form of Advent waiting has been extended into a communal reflection and a time for community prayer, fasting and renewal. At best, it has even meant reaching into the world to help alleviate suffering. Christian congregations and communities often attend to some of the world's anguish in these days. Around the world millions of dollars are raised and thousands of hours given

to ease illness, hurt, loneliness, despair and hunger. These are not insignificant acts.

But, even in these acts of giving, there is often an underlying assumption that the world is just the way it is. We might be able to do a little something here or there but ultimately we'll have to wait on God to make the world right. Yes, there is a belief that God will act. But, in such understandings, faith stays safely within the private spheres of human encounter and resists engaging the public realms of human existence. Therefore, structural patterns of injustice or harm are left unattended to and the cycles of violence, poverty and heartache repeat themselves again and again. Against such a backdrop, our Advent and Christmas offerings can become little more than appeasement for our consciences that we at least did something.

There seems to be a critical concept missing in such responses. Yes, as Christians we wait on God to make the world right. Certainly by our own human hands we'll not get there. Yes, as Christians we believe that God will act, so we are patient, trusting that God knows more than we about what is going on in the world. But, doesn't our Christian theology say something more?

I believe so. In Advent, waiting patiently is never acquiescence and always more than looking towards the 'great by and by' for a better day. It so fervently believes that God is acting in the world - in, through and around us - and is greater than all the powers and principalities of this earth that we are freed to participate in God's reign in the here and now. What a gift that is! No matter how large the struggle, no matter the power of the forces at play, in the end God will overcome all that stands between the creation and its fulfillment.

It is not sufficient for us, then, to be focused on our own spiritual health, leaving 'the world' to God alone or to others, because in God's reign there is no dichotomy between private and public spheres of existence. Both are God's concern and therefore both are our concern as well. Waiting, then, doesn't mean doing nothing, but rather not being discouraged by the obstacles in the way, maintaining the long view that God will prevail. We wait on God in order that we might live and work in confidence, participating with God in the unfolding of God's reign. Patience, then, doesn't mean complacency, but rather not being constrained by 'human time,' trusting that if not in our lifetime in another's. We are not thrown off course by circumstances around us, by the difficulties before us, but rather, in steadfastness, we doggedly keep to the path of God's reign, a path of justice, compassion, healing and truth.

I have learned a lot about this sort of Advent waiting from Palestinians. I will never forget a meeting in 1998 with Dr. Haider Abdul Shafi. A colleague and I had taken a group of new young adult church volunteers to Gaza as part of their orientation. When asked what he felt Palestinians most needed to do in light of all the disappointments with the 'peace process,' Dr. Abdul Shafi said, "First, we should get out of the disaster called Oslo. It was never structured to bring real peace. Then, we should go to our kindergartens and teach our children to be steadfast, to teach them what their rights are and to tell them to stay the course until they achieve them. We've forgotten how to be patient. All of a sudden we're in a hurry and we're willing to accept whatever crumbs the powerful offer us. We've waited 100 years for justice; we can wait a little longer."



On that day, a man who had then lived through 80 years of the 20th century of Palestinian history reminded me what it is to live and work in confidence. On that day, an elderly Muslim taught this younger Christian what it is to stay the course in seeking a more just world. In such a world, then patiently waiting means knocking on the doors of heaven as we seek direction and humility from God as well as knocking on the doors of local and national leaders as we seek a new world for the whole creation. It means wrestling with scriptures about what faithful living is as well as wrestling with documents on human rights to ensure the best of humanity for all. It means using our resources to help alleviate suffering as well as using our resources to see that political and economic structures which keep suffering in place are dismantled.

This Advent I pray that we might find the faith to see 'our redemption draw near' and live as people in the midst of the reign of God, patiently waiting for the fullness of creation.



Sabeel

9th

Day of Fast & Pr

Deir Yassin Day 2003: Remembering & Pr
6th-13th April - A Week for Commemor

“The events that took place in the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin in April 1948 are so symbolic that they might almost serve as the DNA of the Arab-Israeli conflict.”

Anne Karpf The Guardian, March 26, 2002

Those events of 55 years ago when members of the Irgun and Stern Gang massacred over one hundred innocent civilians from the peaceful village of Deir Yassin are profoundly relevant to what is happening today. In April 2002, even as we were remembering Deir Yassin in twenty-three locations around the globe, new atrocities were being committed in Nablus, Ramallah and Jenin. As the London commemoration drew to a close with the recitation of the names of the dead, Mrs Muna Nashashibi reminded us “.... *the massacres go on and the list of names grows longer*”.

April 2003

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Resisting
ation



Reciting the names of the victims - London, April 2002 (photo: E. Young)

To know about the village of Deir Yassin is to know that this was never “a land without people for a people without land” and to visit Deir Yassin today, unnamed, unmarked and unknown, is to witness the ongoing attempt to obliterate from memory the Palestinian people and their history in that land.

To discover the truth about Deir Yassin is to realise that the Palestinian people were dispossessed so that the state of Israel might be established, and that more than 700,000 Palestinians living in over 450 towns and villages did not just run away: they were driven out; a process which is being continued today.

To commemorate Deir Yassin is to affirm the right of all the people of Israel/Palestine to live together in peace, equality and justice.

Wednesday 9th April is the Sabeel Day of Fasting and Prayer and Deir Yassin Day.

Sunday 6th April : Deir Yassin will be commemorated at the Peacock Theatre in London with Marc Ellis and Dr Salma Khadra Jayyusi. We hope that the whole world will be watching.

During the week 6th-13th April commemorative events will be held all over the world. If you would like to consider holding a commemoration, big or small, contact:-

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www.deiryassin.org



by Henry Longbottom

CMS Make a Difference Volunteer

In June 2002, the Israeli government authorized a plan to build a separation barrier running the full 360km length of the West Bank to be completed by June 2003. The wall shall be composed of northern, southern and Jerusalem sections. Having an average width of 50-70 meters, it shall include electric fences, trenches and security patrols. The plan has been imposed unilaterally without any negotiations with any Palestinian party and violates international and human rights law. Already-completed sections in the northeast of the West Bank indicate that the wall shall not be built within the de-facto international borders (approximating to the 1949 Armistice line or “Green Line”). Instead, it is being built within the West Bank, upon seized Palestinian lands. An estimated 10%¹ of the West Bank shall be annexed to Israel. In addition,

approximately 57 Israeli settlements (and 303,000 settlers) will be placed on the west side of the wall². Moreover, the wall whose division is based upon ethnic and religious identity has the effect of dehumanizing Palestinian people. Let us examine some of the ways it does this.

Firstly, the already crippling restrictions on movement will be exacerbated. Those most affected will be those Palestinians who find themselves on

1 LAW Report November 2002: The Apartheid Wall; we are here and they are there

2 ibid

the West side of the wall: cut off from the West Bank yet not part of Israel. An example of one of these “Arab enclaves” will be the 35 Palestinian families residing along the northern edge of Bethlehem who are expected to be put on the Israeli side of the barrier in South Jerusalem, due to the decision to include Rachel’s Tomb inside the barrier³. In order to access farmland, healthcare and education services or families on the other side of the wall, it is expected that these Palestinians will be required to apply for permits. This will not only increase the power of Israeli authorities but will also widen the potential of suspending the granting of permits as a means of collective punishment.

Secondly the wall robs people of their humanity because it is making the West Bank into an open-air prison. This process has already been completed in Gaza. It is apparent that the wall’s engineers have sought to build on the highest ground. An army spokesman was reported as saying that the wall was to “oversee hell”⁴. Constant surveillance by well-armed soldiers will take its psychological toll on those who can see the structure from the windows of their houses and schools.

Thirdly, as a result of the wall, many people will be deprived of their right to work and therefore the dignity of supporting themselves and their families. It is estimated that the land confiscation for the first phase of the wall will exceed 160,000 dunams and

will include the uprooting of tens of thousands of trees⁵. At a time when the Palestinian economy is particularly dependant on agriculture (because for example the closure policies have prevented many workers from reaching their work sites in Israel), this loss of land will result in a substantial reduction in income. Those Palestinian residents trapped between the wall and the Green Line will again be in a vulnerable position because they will be cut off from their farmland and because their ability to market their produce in the West Bank will be severely curtailed. The West Bank unemployment and poverty rates (50% and 58% respectively) will rise⁶.

Similar to its justification of occupation generally, the Israeli politicians claim that the wall is for their country’s safety. Indeed they have called it the “security wall”. Yet a survey of walls throughout history demonstrates that walls are never successful in providing security. The Great Wall of China stretches 4,100 kilometers across northern China, but failed to repel attacks from Mongolians. Similarly, the Constantinople wall failed to protect its citizens and was destroyed in 1453. The Maginot Line was the French fortification constructed between 1929 and 1931 to act as protection against German invasion. The German attack of 1940 bypassed it. The Berlin Wall, built in 1961 failed to prevent East Germans crossing over to West Germany, and it was torn down in 1989. Walls never

3 B’Tselem Report September 2002: The Separation Barrier

4 Quoted from a speech made by Mohammad Dahle to IPCRI, November 25, 2002

5 Reported in The Apartheid Wall Campaign Report #1, November 2002

6 LAW Report, *ibid*

provide protection but rather lure people into a false sense of security. They symbolize a failure of communication and are no substitute for political solutions.

However it would be careless to view the West Bank wall simply as another example of a wall separating two nations. This is not a conventional wall. Palestine is far from being a sovereign state and there is much to suggest that the wall is designed to keep things that way. The barrier furthers the “bantustanization” of the West Bank into hundreds of small entities that cannot sustain themselves. Indeed a comparison with the former South African Apartheid regime sheds light on the effects of the wall. International treaties⁷ have legally defined Apartheid as “a system of institutionalized racial

segregation and discrimination for the purposes of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group and systematically oppressing them”. Land seizures, creation of ghettos, separation of families and controls on freedom of movement are based exclusively on racial lines and so the wall is arguably an instrument of apartheid.

The true aim of the separation barrier is to put the “other” out of sight and mind. On the section of the wall enclosing the settlement of Gilo, a pastoral

⁷ Including Protocol 1 to the Geneva Conventions, the International Criminal Court Statute 1998, and the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid 1973



panorama has been painted onto the concrete. Blotting out the Palestinian town of Beit Jala that faces the settlement, the wall murals attempt to create another reality. The wall prevents contact between the two sides and entrenches hostility. Perhaps the events at Kibbutz Metzger that is situated next to the new wall reveal this. In November 2002, a Palestinian gunman broke into a kibbutz and killed five of its residents. Its Administrator Doron Lieber, commented that the construction of the wall (which the Kibbutz had actively campaigned against) may have been at least partly responsible for the episode that destroyed 50 years of good relations with their Arab neighbours. He also courageously maintained that only friendship can provide security for both peoples⁸.

St Paul was faced with walls of separation that divided different social groups within the early Christian community. He viewed them as evidence of a much deeper rift-between man and God. Addressing this he proclaimed: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down our dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us"⁹. This is not just a spiritual message. It applies to a social and political context as well. A recent Amos Trust poster states that "No one is free until everyone is free". In other words a person who looks down into another's hell, is not complete if he or she does not accept the humanity of "the other". Speaking of his experience of watching people queuing for the first free elections in South Africa in 1994, Desmond Tutu described

how people reacted to one another: "They discovered not a colored, a black, an Indian, a white. No they found a fellow human being. What a profound scientific discovery for the whites, that blacks, coloreds and Indians were in fact human beings, who had the same concerns and anxieties and aspirations as they did. They wanted a decent home, a good job, a safe environment for their families, and good schools for their children. Hardly any of them wanted to drive the whites into the sea"¹⁰.

Tragically, the construction of the wall of separation is yet another obstacle for the recognition of common humanity. It will provide neither security nor peace.

⁸ Ha'aretz article by Aviv Lavie: Open Gates, despite it all, 15 November, 2002

⁹ Ephesians 2:14

¹⁰ Desmond Tutu. No Future without Forgiveness. 1999: Random House Press.

HOLDING ON HUMANITY

The Word of God is never neutral. Like the two disciples of Emmaus, it reaches us where we are and as we are. It challenges us and invites us to life. Our reading of the Word of God is also never neutral. It surprises us in the middle of our realities, concerns, sorrows and expectations, to project its light on them. The Word of God is always a word “*here and now*”.

What does Chapter 16 in the book of Acts mean to us today?

On the road

What strikes us in this chapter is the constant movement of St. Paul and his companions. Like Jesus, they traveled from one place to another. They went to Derbe and Lystra, Phrygia and Galatia, Troas, Samothracia, Neapolis, Philippi and like Jesus, they “went about

by Father Rafiq Khoury
Bible Study on Acts, Chapter 16.

doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil...” (Acts 10:38), preaching the Good News of the Kingdom, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Vita in motu (life is movement), as the ancient Romans used to say. This physical and geographical movement happens to be a human and a spiritual one, shifting our displacements from an outside reality to an inner dynamic, where we are confronted with the deep realities of our lives and, therefore, with the mysteries of our existence.

On the road, we reach people *where* they are and as they are, in the realities of their daily life, with their activities and concerns, possibilities and limitations, capacities and weaknesses and obstructions, dreams and plans, light and darkness, in one word, in their real self. There, people are no more a creation of

our fantasies and imagination, but real people in flesh and blood,

There, Lydia is the “devout woman”, who “was in the purple-dye trade”. There is also the unnamed girl “the slave girl who was a soothsayer” making “a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes”. Her masters... “saw that there was no hope of making any more money out of her”, and finally, the jailer who was a lost man with his fears and concerns.

Dealing with people in that way, we discover them as human faces beyond disfigured and disfiguring masks. But, at the same time and in the same way, we discover ourselves wherever we are and just as we are, with our emotions, obstructions, classifications, stereotypes etc. At that point, real life begins for them as well as for us.

On the road, we find ourselves in situations where choices have to be taken. In some places we choose to speak; in others we choose not to intervene. These choices are not ideological ones, but responding to the very realities of life. What seems to be controversial in these choices is dictated by the appeals of life and the inspirations of wisdom. “For everything there is a season ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3: 1,7). To make these choices, we need the spirit of discernment, which for us is the Holy Spirit. In this chapter we see the Spirit at work, not allowing them to enter here, telling them not to preach there, commanding them to go and preach elsewhere... The Spirit of God is the Spirit of “here and now”.

The road is, therefore, a constant invitation to conversion with all its demands. The road is crucifying and healing at the same time and in the same process.

Stagnation is the enemy of life. When we feel that we are no more challenged and invited to respond, we really cease to live. We escape from where life is. The road is a master of life. *Vita in motu*.

Holding on to Humanity

We go ahead in our journey in this chapter of Acts. Paul and Silas are taken to prison. The pretext is a mixture of interests, lies and manipulations. A slave girl is taken advantage of, exploited. Her masters make money of her telling fortunes. Paul liberates her from the evil spirit which angered the exploiting masters. Then starts the law court, which is similar to the trial of Jesus and that of Stephen. It is a long story - repeated regularly since the beginning of the world - where the exploiters use the law to oppress the exploited for the disadvantage of both. Then begins the mechanism or carnival of lies: “These people are causing a disturbance in our city”. The crowd is asked to join in - as it very often happens - and show “its hostility to them”. The rest is “logic”: they are “thrown into prison”. Everybody is dehumanizing everybody else. Dehumanization is always a step towards murder.

The jailer is a specific case. He is the last category of the pyramid, and therefore the most exposed, the most vulnerable, and the weakest one. He has no other way but to throw “them into the inner prison and fasten their feet in the stocks”. The weakest is the most cruel, and therefore the most dehumanized. He has no other way to save himself in that carnival of lies.

But the story goes on. Suddenly there was an earthquake. It was so strong that “all the doors flew open and the chains fell from all the prisoners”. The jailer, in his dismay and despair, was going to kill himself, “presuming that all prisoners had escaped”. He is a fearful and trembling person, alienated from his very humanity. Here Paul intervenes and prevents the jailer from suicide: “Don’t do yourself any harm; we are all here”.

Paul and Silas could have profited from the confusion in order to escape. What do they have to do with a jailer who was so cruel to them and to himself at the

same time? Paul breaks this mechanism of death and dehumanization and addresses the jailer as a human being, who is a victim of dehumanization by his powerful superiors. Paul deals with him in a way that would give him back his humanity. Paul goes beyond the masks and suddenly discovers the humanity of the jailer. In the cycle of violence itself, he introduces a new element, which breaks the cycle of violence and opens the way to life. In that way, he really saves the jailer from his superiors and from himself. Paul chooses to hold on to humanity. The jailer was the “enemy”. He becomes a human being. The jailer comes back to himself and his eyes are opened to another reality. New doors are open to him, where fears are overcome and oppression is overwhelmed. A process of humanizing is taking place. The whole thing ends with a celebration.

Power and human rights

We reach the last episode of this chapter: the liberation of Paul and his companion. To the announcement of the jailer, Paul reacts vehemently: he refuses to be pushed out “in the quiet”. He expresses his stand with a “What?”. Face to face with the magistrates, Paul behaves in a different way than the jailer. Here, he holds on to his rights as a Roman citizen. Could he not go out “in the quiet”?

Here, we face another question: does holding on to humanity mean that we give up our human rights? Paul responds with a ‘no’. He faces what can be called the kingdom of fear on all the levels of its pyramid. The magistrates fear the central power in Rome. The jailer fears the magistrates. The masters exploit this fear to their interests. Paul decides to challenge and break this cycle of fear. Different situations request different choices. Face to face with the magistrates, keeping silent would be to conform with the lies of power in an indirect way. Facing power, which deals with its own interests at the cost of human rights, he chooses to challenge that power and reveal its lies and hypocrisy. It is a question of liberation, liberation of

the oppressor and of the oppressed. “...you will know the truth and the truth will make you free”. (John 8 :32) To enter the kingdom of God and to hold on to humanity here means to resist political power. Holding on to humanity does not mean to give up our selves and our rights, nor to revenge, but is a process of liberation. The magistrates have to be challenged and disturbed in order to awaken them to another reality, which is hidden by an uncontested and unquestioned set of fallacious values. The jailer received the message. It is more difficult for the magistrates: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). But the Gospel adds: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” (Mark 10:27).

Conclusion

The Word of God is never neutral. Nor is our reading of the Word of God. What possibilities does this chapter of Acts have in a situation of globalization, of oppression, of occupation, of violence, of struggle for human rights? What does it mean for the occupiers and the occupied, the jailer and the magistrates, the oppressors and the oppressed, for Paul and Silas themselves, and naturally for every one of us? Love is a political stand. Love is a liberating process, is it not?

Father Rafiq Khoury is a Roman Catholic priest responsible for religious education at the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. ■

Sabeel 2003

International Solidarity Visit

29 March - 6 April 2003

“Be not afraid, speak out and do not keep
silence: I am with you.”

Acts 18:9

Program (subject to change)

Saturday, March 29 - Ahlan wa Sahlan

Welcome, registration and opening worship

Sunday, March 30 - Celebrating our Unity

Worship in local churches, evening reception with church leaders

Monday, March 31 - Bearing Witness in Bethlehem

Visit to the Bethlehem area, evening presentation

Tuesday, April 1 - Bearing Witness in Nablus

Visit to the Nablus area, evening in Tiberias

Wednesday, April 2 - Bearing Witness in the Galilee

Visit to the Galilee area, cultural evening

Thursday, April 3 - Day of Meditation and Prayer

Visit to the Galilee, evening lecture

Friday, April 4 - Bearing Witness in Ramallah

Visit to the Ramallah area, free evening

Saturday, April 5 - Bearing Witness in Jerusalem

Visit to Jerusalem, evening lecture

Sunday, April 6 - Sending Forth

Advocacy workshops and closing worship

*Post-visit : Optional overnight trip to Gaza (conditions permitting).

*Additional travel and accommodation fees will apply

Full local travel package: \$640 (this price includes hotel, all meals, registration and internal transport). To register and arrange your accommodation, contact Sabeel.

For air travel and transport to and from airport, please contact local travel agents:

Bible Lands

Tourist Bureau

Tel: 6271169, 6272218

Fax: 9722- 627-2218

links@palnet.com

Daher Travel

Tel. 6283235 , 6260825

Fax: 9722- 627-1574

dahert@netvision.net.il

http://www.dahertravel.com

Guiding Star Ltd.

Tel. 6273150

Fax: 9722-627-3147

info@guidingstar2.com

Shepherd Tours & Travel

Tel: 02-6284121

Fax: 02-6280251

shepherd@baraka.org

Universal Tourist Agency

Tel: 02-6284383

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uta@zahav.net.il

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Call: (972) 2 532 7136; Fax: (972) 2 532 7137 Email: visit@sabeel.org

Olive Tree Campaign

YWCA of Palestine The East Jerusalem YMCA

Since the beginning of the second Intifada, in October 2000, thousands of acres of farmland and over 112,000 olive trees in the Palestinian Territories have been destroyed by the Israeli Occupation Army. This ancient source of basic livelihood and nutrition was one of the main targets of these destructive practices, which continued daily. In spite of the destruction of the very foundations of their existence and in spite of the ever-increasing violence in the Holy Land, most Palestinians, women, men, and children, have not lost hope and are committed to rebuilding society and its structures without violence.

The East Jerusalem YMCA and the YWCA of Palestine are in the forefront of this effort to KEEP HOPE ALIVE through projects like the Olive Tree Campaign which aims to plant 50,000 olive trees in the very places where they have been uprooted and destroyed. Through the sponsorship of YMCAs and YWCAs, as well as churches and other groups and individuals around the world, hope

can stay alive in the lives of Palestinians throughout the territories, olive tree planting will be a sign of solidarity that encourages Palestinians to keep their sense of hope and to reaffirm their commitment to work constructively toward peace-building.

The amount of \$20 covers the cost of the young plant, distribution, planting, and information for farmers on the best techniques for olive tree care and production improvement. The cost also covers an official certificate, a sponsor label to be inscribed with the sponsor's name, and miscellaneous implementation costs of the project.

We look forward to your support in helping us KEEP HOPE ALIVE within Palestinian communities throughout the West Bank and hope that your participation in this campaign will be the first step in ongoing partnership and solidarity with the Palestinian people.



Snapshots of our Activities

Another year has come to an end with another lost opportunity for world leaders to restore peace in our world. The alarming signals of an imminent war in the region are getting louder, and the efforts to end the Israeli occupation are far from achieving that much needed goal. Disheartened, but with spirits still hopeful, Sabeel continues to implement its local and international programs.

Community-Building

“Walk in the Truth” was the theme for the day of fasting and prayer held on October 8, 2002. It began at Sabeel with individual and group prayers, reflections and hymns and ended with an Ecumenical Worship Service at St. Stephen’s Dominican Church. “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” *John 8:32* reminds us that there is a way to end all the injustice.

Community Iftar - Sabeel hosted a group of Muslim clerics and community leaders in Jerusalem for a Ramadan Iftar meal held at Sabeel. The group of twenty-four was also composed of Sabeel Board members and Christian clergy. Archmandrite Atallah Hanna and Sheikh Tayseer Tamimi both emphasized this important unique relation that binds the two faiths of the one nation. The warm and friendly atmosphere was a concrete proof of continued fellowship as the clergy arrived straight from a 24-hour retreat entitled “the spirituality of dialogue” led by Father Rafiq Khoury from the Roman Catholic Church.

Advent Program - This year’s theme was “The Message of Christmas Today”. The three meetings



Iftar 2002



were well attended. Archmandrite Atallah Hanna from the Greek Orthodox Church, Father Jamal Khadder from the Latin Seminary in Beit Jala, and Archmandrite Mtanios Haddad from the Greek Catholic Church led the reflections. Advent hymns from the different traditions and interesting discussions enriched the gatherings, the first of which coincided with the feast of St. Barbara where the traditional wheat pudding was served.

Sabeel Ecumenical Christmas Dinner - To add new flavor to the traditional program, and in addition to the ecumenical hymns chanted by representatives of the various churches, the budding Raja' (Hope) band of twelve young Christians presented variations to the well-known Christmas carols. Before giving the benediction, the Armenian Bishop Aris Shirvanian announced the "good news" that the Israelis had promised to allow Christians entry to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve (without their cars!). Truly enough, the curfew on Bethlehem was partially lifted for one day, but it was then imposed with stricter measures including a teargas assault on Bethlehem University.

Clergy

In addition to the yearly retreat in Ein Karem, the clergy programs included an annual trip, this year to Haifa. Though no priest from the West Bank could participate, the Jerusalem group was determined to make the best of the day with their Haifa brethren. On this occasion, the priests in Haifa took time to socialize and pray with their visitors from Jerusalem in

the Episcopal Center, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Maronite churches. What rich traditions and liturgy! What a beautiful gathering of faithful shepherds trying to meet the practical and spiritual needs of their parishioners and to work for social justice and peace. The December Clergy program participated in the Christmas Dinner, where most tables were attended by representatives of the churches.

Women

A one day seminar entitled "Together ... we will build" was held at the YWCA in Jerusalem on Friday, November 22, 2002. Ninety-two women experienced the togetherness of listening, sharing, discussing and planning as women. *Women and The Bible perspective*, *Women and Social Challenges*, *Women and Economic Conditions* were the three sessions led by Radia Kupti, (World Day of Prayer and Nazareth Sabeel), Dr. Eileen Kuttub (Head of Women's Studies at Birzeit University), and Hind Khoury (Financial Consultant and Sabeel Board). The presentations triggered many interesting discussions, followed by an exercise in self-assessment. This was the first in a series of workshops that will lead to a local conference under the same title in 2003.





Youth

Regular monthly youth meetings with the Jerusalem Youth groups paved the way for a Youth festival on October 20, 2002. About 150 young people gathered in Latroun Monastery to sing, pray and share a day of witnessing with fun. Three musical groups moved the participants, encouraging them to actively witness for their faith. A bible study on non-violent resistance engaged all in lively discussion. The day ended too soon!

The Youth Leadership Training Program - On December 9, 2002, 13 youth leaders completed the 36-hour youth leadership three month training program, ready to test their newly acquired skills within their own youth groups. This pilot project helped in the evaluation of the course, defined the needs for a more advanced course and demonstrated the benefits of repeating the course in other locations.

Visitors

The determination and courage of visitors is always a comfort for Sabeel. Among the many groups that came by in the last few months were visitors from the United States and all over Europe; from organizations such as CPT, FOR, YMCA and Christian Aid. We were happy to meet journalists, clergy, Unitarians, friends of Sabeel,

film crews and members of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel, of the WCC who came at various times for discussion and dialogue at the Center. Dale Hildebrand representing KAIROS, Canada spent two full days getting acquainted with the ministry of Sabeel. We appreciated their deep commitment to partnership and to our future of work together.

Volunteers - Sabeel welcomes visiting volunteers doing research on specific topics pertaining to the current situation. David Wurfel, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto spent six weeks this winter gathering information on individuals in the area working on peace and justice. Sabeel bids farewell to Henry Longbottom, who worked at Sabeel for six months in coordination with CMS, England. Sabeel wishes Henry the best as a lawyer.

Presbyterian Church, USA - On October 9, Sabeel hosted the Right Rev. Fahed Abu Aqel, the Moderator of PC(USA) for this year. For Sabeel, it was good to be with both Fahed and the Rev. Victor Makari, friends and supporters of our ministry. Later in the afternoon, church representatives and community leaders, Christian and Muslim, attended the reception held in honor of the visiting delegation. The Rev. Fahed is the first Palestinian by birth to hold such an important position and the Palestinian community hopes that it will be in this capacity that he can pursue in his efforts for a just peace.



Purpose Statement of Sabeel

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. *Sabeel* strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on *Friends of Sabeel* groups in your area please contact our International representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.

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