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THE ADVENT OF PEACE

A gospel journey to Christmas

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Dedicated to Canon Naim Ateek, founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem; to Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of Wi'am, Bethlehem; and to Pastor Mitri Raheb, director of the International Center of Bethlehem

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Introduction: the Advent journey

Once more Advent stirs up long-buried hidden yearnings and longings: while department stores are already seducing us with irresistible bargains for goods we do not need, and never imagined that we or our children were missing, the hearts of people of faith and vision turn to deeper desires – the peace that always seems to elude us, both personally and globally. Within Christianity, Advent focuses on journeying, waiting and hoping: at the end of the journey this year, as always, we will retell the Christmas story of the angels who sang of peace on earth to people of goodwill (Luke 1.14). The song points to Advent's deeper hope, our real longing – that of a new creation, creation redeemed, forgiven and reconciled. *A world at peace*. Would it be possible to retell this story, to relive this journey, in such a way as to articulate these dreams of reconciled creation, so that our lives could be reshaped by them? It would need to be a retelling, enabling us to celebrate the feast differently, with the journey to peace and reconciliation at its heart. And it would mean that when the Christmas tree is cast aside, the decorations folded away for next year, this journey would carry on and its real work begin.

The peace we long for is on different levels. Before even thinking about the war scenes that fester on at a global level, we all have personal issues that are hard to face – perhaps wounds from broken relationships, job disappointments, struggles with poverty and disability, living with HIV & AIDS, grief at the death of a loved one or simply the diminishment that comes with ageing and illness. Perhaps life has become devoid of meaning. Many friends and neighbours are refugees; some sought asylum here – all carry haunting memories of a homeland where they could no longer dwell, due to climate disasters, a genocidal regime, war or grinding poverty.

To become reconciled – to feel at peace and be forgiven, to reach contentment – is an important part of any spirituality. At another level, attaining peace-of-the-heart may be blocked by disagreements

and feuds that disrupt families, communities and nations, stretching across the generations. Sometimes in family feuds people lose any sense of how the dispute began. Within Christianity, many Christian groups are at loggerheads – often exacerbated by political and economic factors. Reconciliation, far from being a possibility, is sometimes not even longed for. At the most intractable level, our world is beset by bitter conflicts that include all the aforementioned factors – from tribal conflicts, caste discrimination in India, the war in Afghanistan, the continuing conflict in the Middle East and the violence that carries on in the numerous cities.

Today there is a changed scene that offers new hope: never before has reconciliation been viewed as a public discourse involving all conflictual groups. Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, in which Archbishop Desmond Tutu played such a prominent role, reconciliation has come to be seen as the key symbol that sums up hopes for justice and restoration of peace, and leads to a transformed state of affairs. Irish President Mary Robinson, at the inauguration of her presidency in Dublin Castle in 1990, placed reconciliation at the heart of her leadership, invoking the symbol of the Fifth Province of Ireland:

> As everyone knows, there are only four geographical provinces on this island. The Fifth Province is not anywhere here or there . . . It is a place within each of us, that place that is open to the other, that swinging door which allows us to venture out and others to venture in . . . While Tara was the political centre of Ireland, tradition has it that this fifth province acted as a second centre, a necessary balance. If I am a symbol of anything, I would like to be a symbol of this reconciling, healing province.[1]

This use of the concept of reconciliation opens up a vision for this book – of reconciliation as the active means of attaining peace with justice, as well as the goal of a transformed state of affairs – for all parties. It resists any cheapening version of peace without justice, peace imposed by a superior power or, in personal terms, acquiescence to another's viewpoint with loss of self-esteem.

Reconciliation is both the longed-for goal and the way to it. It is the personal journey seeking forgiveness, the community journey towards justice and the political journey towards the healing of society.

In this Advent quest for peace, the Gospels will be our tools. They set the stage for us in the holy places of the Bible lands (Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem), telling the story of Jesus' earthly ministry of reconciliation. Here the first Christians followed their own quest for peace with justice, under the Roman occupation. But they are also sacred texts for us in the present, as we set out on this journey.

Our first task will be to make connections with Middle-Eastern Christians after Jesus, and also to ask what their situation is today. Highlighting the needs of Middle-Eastern Christians in their search for peace will evoke a response from all Christians, in diverse contexts. Retelling the old story will also evoke the centrality of the need for mutual forgiveness in our own lives, and will ask us to read the Gospel stories in a way that makes this central. A focus – but not an exclusive one – on the Middle East is chosen because at the moment it is the crucible where many conflicts interlink, because it involves all Christians in a responsibility for peacemaking, and because it is the cradle where Christianity itself was born.

Bridging the gap: Christians in the Bible lands then and now

What has happened since that early whirlwind spread of the gospel around the Mediterranean, in its flourishing and its conflicts, to produce its contemporary complexities? Here I try both to create a bridge across the centuries and to show how seeds of discord with deep historical roots may not yet completely close off possibilities of reconciliation today.

The context for the writing of the four Gospels – which I am assuming were written some time between 50 and 90 AD – was one of war and rebellion,[2] namely that of the Jewish people against the Roman occupation. This meant that many of the villages – scenes in the events of the ministry of Jesus – were being destroyed. How would people remember the important events that had occurred here? Memories are crucial for encouraging people to persevere in times of conflict. It must have been the need to keep these memories alive and vibrant for fledgling Christian communities, together with the need for resources for the community conflicts that had begun to spring

up, that inspired the creation of the early texts. The danger of the times in which Luke and Matthew wrote – it is thought that Mark wrote before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD – explains the emphasis on the consolation Jesus offers the disciples when they should face persecution (Luke 21.10–19),[3] his urgent exhortation not to give up on prayer and the plea always to put the kingdom of God above all things. Read against the contemporary occupation of Palestine by the Zionist[4] government, there is a remarkable congruence between the Roman occupation of New Testament times and the present situation. (For clarity's sake, I refer throughout to Israel and Palestine in accordance with the official terminology of current International Law, except where 'Israel' is referred to in its biblical sense, both in Old and New Testaments.) As is well known, the context of persecution followed the early Christian communities throughout its spread into the Mediterranean world as far as Rome. This would come to an end with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (312 AD) and his imposition of the Pax Romana on the known Western world, with the consequence that Christianity became the established religion of his vast empire.

But it was not only external political regimes that caused problems for the growth of the Christian Churches. Following the missionary journeys of Paul, the Church had begun to put down roots in many countries, among different races and cultures. But as Canon Naim Ateek (founder of Sabeel[5] in Jerusalem), relates: 'Difficulties and misunderstandings began to emerge as a result of theological, political, cultural and geographical difficulties.'[6]

The Churches began to be caught up with theological controversies, mostly concerning the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God, resulting in the early Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). Eventually major schisms and separations resulted into the development of the Assyrian Church of Iraq, the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Church of Ethiopia, the Syrian Orthodox and the Armenian Orthodox Churches.[7] Yet this diversity, which could have been such a source of richness, culminated in the tragic schism between Eastern and Western Churches in 1054. Today, in Jerusalem, there are thirteen separate Christian communities: six Catholic, five Orthodox, two Protestant (Anglican and

Lutheran) Churches. The next decisive event that Christianity would encounter came in the seventh century with the rise of Islam throughout the Middle East, North Africa and eventually through Spain into Central Europe. Relationships with Islam were initially good, with its general tolerance of Christianity, mutual respect and acceptance of Christian pilgrimage. Many Christians became Muslims to avoid taxes from the Byzantine Empire. But although Christianity was spreading through many lands, in the end the general effect of the Islamic conquest was to weaken Christianity. A poignant example of the initial tolerance of Islam towards Christians – a tolerance that would eventually be shattered – is shown by the story of the peaceful conquest of Jerusalem by Caliph Omar the Just and the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As Toine van Teeffelen, a Bethlehem-based anthropologist, relates:

> Ironically, the responsibility for guarding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the holiest sites in Christendom, falls on the shoulders of two Moslem families, the Joudehs (historically known as Ghudia) and the Nusseibehs. According to a complicated agreement whose origins are lost in the mists of time, the Joudeh family keeps the keys and the Nusseibeh family opens the doors . . . the responsibility has been passed from fathers to sons.[8]

Caliph Omar's respect for the church was also shown by the fact that he refused to pray in it – because then the Muslims might have turned it into a mosque.[9] Under Muslim rule, despite the merciful behaviour of Salah-ed-din (Saladin) and his successor, his nephew Kamil (Salah-ed-din died in 1193), tolerance was interspersed with persecution of Christians and Jews. In fact, attacks on the holy shrines were one of the causes of the Crusades. Yet amid this bitterness there is still one remarkable legend displaying mutual understanding between St Francis of Assisi and Islam. Francis had joined the Fourth Crusade, and seeing that the attack was going badly, courageously crossed the enemy lines to confront Kamil. His intentions were to convert the Muslim ruler to Christianity, apparently unaware that Kamil was surrounded with Coptic advisers fully familiar with the Christian faith. St Francis offered to enter a fiery furnace on the condition that should he come out alive, Kamil and his people would embrace Christianity.

The Sultan replied to the saint with a lesson in humanity and common sense, saying that gambling with one's life was not a valid proof of one's God, and then saw St Francis on his way with courtesy and lavish gifts.

Any hopes of the tolerance and amicable relations between Christianity and Islam continuing were shattered by the Crusades from the eleventh century onward. The slaughter of this period is well documented. The Crusaders – Western Christians – saw Muslims, Jews and Eastern Christians all as enemies. From this tragic period, antagonism between Eastern and Western Christians has been the legacy, although the many movements of reconciliation have begun to rebuild trust – the Middle East Council of Churches is now the most ecumenical body in the world.[10]

Relationships with Islam remain extremely complex. Palestine, between 1517 and 1917, was ruled by the Ottoman Empire, and the Churches played an important role in providing material help – medical, food and education – to an impoverished population. But whereas the relationship with the rulers was tense and difficult (the genocide of Armenian Christians should never be forgotten), frequently at village level relationships between Muslim and Christian were positive, a fact frequently stressed today. So it must be stated clearly that, even in a global, post-September 11 context of the American so-called 'war against terror' (a phrase now widely discredited in the current US Presidency of Barack Obama), the frequent unjust targeting and scapegoating of Muslims as terrorists, the cruel false assumption that Arabs are all Muslims and terrorists – despite all this, normally relationships between Christians and Muslims in Palestine are amicable. Of course there are disputes – as there are with all groups of people. The late husband of Jean Zaru (a Quaker theologian and activist who lives in Ramallah in the West Bank), was principal of the Quaker School at Ramallah for 18 years. The students at this school were mainly Muslim, and Jean Zaru is explicit about the good relations between the two groups and the fact that Christians, who are in a minority, have learned to coexist with their fellow Muslims.[11] That there are extremist groups of violence cannot be denied; but the focus in this book will be the groups – here and elsewhere – that have chosen to work for peace non-violently and in a holistic manner.

A more recent significant historical factor for Christians in the Holy Lands was the Protestant missionary movement preceding, accompanying and following the colonialist movements of the nineteenth century. This would provide yet another means of dividing Christians. It is frequently assumed that Palestinian Christians are all converts as a result of this movement. Yet as Sami Awad, director of the Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem, declared on being asked if he was a convert from Islam to Christianity: 'Yes, I am a convert: my ancestors converted at Pentecost!'[12] His declaration highlights what causes Christians in the Middle East frequent suffering: that they are the successors of the first Christians and seldom recognized as such.

The last factor that needs to be addressed in bridging the centuries with the first Christians and providing the most significant precursor to the current scene was the development of Christian Zionism, especially in the nineteenth century. In fact this had much earlier roots, which actually preceded and encouraged Jewish Zionism, in the Protestant Reformation and subsequent thinking in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[13] It was John Nelson Darby (1800–82), founder of the Plymouth Brethren, who laid the foundations of Evangelical Christian Zionism. He built a bridge between biblical prophecy and its historical development, dividing history into seven epochs or 'dispensations', culminating in the millennial kingdom of Jesus, following the battle of Armageddon. Here the inspiration was not the four Gospels, but Revelation. Darby's popularity waned in Britain and he then concentrated his Dispensationalism on America – with immense consequences for today's developments.

The way that Christian Zionism was able to coincide with the aims of Jewish Zionism attained its culminating moment in the founding of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948.[14] Many Christians were convinced that a homeland should be restored to the Jewish people long before the Shoah (Holocaust). In Britain, Lord Shaftesbury was a key actor in this movement. A friend of Lord Balfour, with his passionate philanthropy, Lord Shaftesbury combined a fervent evangelicalism, adhering to the belief that the Second Coming of Christ would take place in Israel, which must become the homeland for the Jews (although other places, such as Cyprus and Uganda, had been proposed). The idea of 'The ingathering of Jews', which must be made

possible for Christ's coming, continues to fuel both Christian and Jewish Zionism.[15]

Such passion for Israel's restoration on the part of Christian evangelicals coincided with Theodore Herzl's call for a Jewish state that would be 'an outpost in the heart of darkness'. Herzl (1860–1904), who was born in Budapest and active in Vienna, was responsible for the first Zionist Congress in Basel (Switzerland) in 1897. He pleaded: 'When will it seem that my efforts on this earth have been successful? When poor Jewish boys become proud young Jews.'[16]

But this could not happen without a country, as Herzl expressed in *Der Judenstaat* in 1896.[17] The racism of Herzl's attitude – the despising of the indigenous population of Palestine – has been compared by the late Michael Prior to the conquest of South Africa by the British and Dutch, and the North American conquest of indigenous Indians.[18] He points out that it is a racism that has extended into the present. For example, the famous biblical archaeologist, William Foxwell Albright, stated:

> From the standpoint of a philosopher of history, it often seems *necessary that a people of marked inferior type, should vanish before a people of superior potentialities, since there is a point beyond which racial mixture cannot go without disaster* . . . Thus the Canaanites with their orgiastic nature worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its pastoral simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism and its severe code of ethics.[19]

Herzl's Zionist movement, originally a secular Jewish movement, was violently opposed by Jewish Orthodoxy: for it was their profound belief that the Messiah, not human beings, would restore the land of Israel. Such an act required divine intervention. But Herzl thought Jews would never be respected without a country, and sought a European sponsor for his project. Gradually this secular movement became transformed into a Jewish religious movement, especially by the efforts of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (1865–1935) and later his son. Rabbi Kook came to Israel in 1904 and his teachings 'integrated the traditional, passive religious longing for the land with the modern, secular, active Zionism, giving birth to a comprehensive,

religious-nationalist ideology'.[20] The Rabbi saw this form of utopian Zionism as the means not only of restoring Jews to the Holy Land, but also of redemption for the whole of humanity. He even saw the Balfour Declaration[21] as divinely inspired. But it was his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, who, in the wake of the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, mediated his father's teachings, and was responsible for his becoming a cult hero and inspiration for the *Gush Emunim* settler movement in the developing State of Israel.

Nor was it coincidental that there should be a change in the fortunes of Jews worldwide. Expelled from Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, they had been a minority in Palestine under Islam and endured discrimination and anti-Semitism from Christians, an anti-Semitism that would spread throughout Europe, bursting out in expulsions and pogroms and culminating in the persecution and Holocaust of Hitler's Nazi Germany. The memory of this suffering is a constant strand in this book. What had sparked Jewish nationalism in the nineteenth century was the French Revolution – as it had sparked other contemporary nationalist movements. Hence Zionism was originally conceived as a secular, colonialist movement. But finally, in Lord Balfour was found a European sponsor – although, ironically, Balfour's enthusiasm was founded on his reading of the Bible. At the same time pressure had been building up in America for the return of the Jews to Palestine. For example, William Blackstone, a Methodist and ardent believer that the true home of the Jews was Israel, had written to President Benjamin Harrison, supporting this cause.[22] Significantly, in 1922, Britain obtained the Mandate for Palestine, eventually to be handed over to the United Nations in 1948. Many difficulties and tensions were experienced during the next two decades, including the Arab rebellion of 1936. The Second World War brought the situation to a head. The Jewish people were enduring the systemic persecution of the Hitler regime and feared total extermination. Many Jews wanted to go to the United States, but the Zionists wanted them to be part of the new Palestine. So now came the fateful partition of the land by the United Nations: the Israelis were given 56 per cent and the Palestinians were given 44 per cent. When the British left, the Israelis officially declared the State of Israel. According to Naim Ateek, 'the Palestinians paid the price for European anti-Semitism'.[23] We are thus

confronted by an immense chasm and a complex situation dividing us from the earliest followers of Jesus and the challenges of the first Christians of the Bible lands.

Contemporary tensions

The truth is that two peoples claim the same land. And they claim it with an intensity and love that constitutes their very identity. This has often been taught to biblical students in the West in a very one-sided way. In my own theological studies, in the context of post-Holocaust sympathy for the Jewish people and the attempt to eradicate anti-Semitism in Christian theology, the stress was placed on Jewish love for *ha arets* (the land), and the evidence of this in Scripture was easy to find. Many biblical scholars of this period attempted to redress the wrongs of the Jewish people through European history, but in a way that was blind to the existence and history of the Palestinian people. So it was a revelation – and part of 'the water flowing from the other side of the mountain' (the phrase of the biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey)[24] – to discover an equal passion for the land among Arab Christians and Muslims. Anyone reading Elias Chacour's book (Elias Chacour is Archbishop of Galilee), *We Belong to the Land*, cannot fail to be overwhelmed by the tremendous affinity with the land he expresses – the trees, rocks and landscapes of Palestine.

> Mobile western people have difficulty comprehending the significance of the land for Palestinians. We belong to the land. We identify with the land, which has been treasured, cultivated, and nurtured by countless generations of ancestors. As a child I joined my family in moving large rocks from the fields . . . It took months to clear the stones from just a small field. The land is so holy, so sacred to us, because we have given it our sweat and blood.[25]

Many such stories lament the lost trees and plants, and the farmers' lost livelihood of tending to olive and fruit trees.

Tragically for the indigenous population, the division of the territory of Palestine proposed by the United Nations was never honoured, as the Zionist government took 78 per cent of the land, not 56 per cent (see page 9), even though there were far more Palestinian

inhabitants than Jewish. Thousands of Palestinians were pushed out of what is now Israel, so that only the West Bank and Gaza (22 per cent) were left to Palestinians – Muslims and Christians. In 1967 a war was fought between Egypt and Syria on the one hand and Israel on the other. Jordan, who was in control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem at that time, joined the war and lost all of the 22 per cent that remained of Palestine. Arab countries – Syria, Jordan and Egypt, with contributions from others – invaded to help Palestine but were ultimately no match for the might of the Israeli armed forces. At this point, between 750,000 and 800,000 people were driven from their homes in what has been called by the Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and described by the Arabic words *al-Nakba*, 'the catastrophe'.[26]

In this, 531 villages were razed to the ground. A few were left to be taken over by the Jewish people. Those Palestinians who tried to return after the armistice were killed. There were four million refugees – many in camps to this day in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon – with no right of return to their homes. There are now 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza, 2.5 million in the West Bank and 1.3 million inside Israel.[27] But the situation constantly changes, given the increasing level of harassment in the three areas.

Whereas Christianity had been the dominant religion until Crusader times, Christians now make up less than 2 per cent of the population. There are 400,000 Palestinian Christians in the world, 50,000 in Palestine and 110,507 in Israel.[28] Those who live in Israel, while facing restrictions and difficulties, experience far fewer difficulties than those in the West Bank, who live under Israeli occupation, suffer poverty, daily harassment and persecution.

Naim Ateek's predictions are stark for the future of Christianity in the Bible lands.[29] Because there is no real movement in the peace process, and the oppression gets steadily worse, Christians in Gaza will gradually disappear, the West Bank will lose its Christian presence in the north and the remaining Christians will cluster in the south around the Ramallah and Bethlehem areas. In Bethlehem only 1.5 per cent of the population is now Christian – such is the effect of emigration. There is no reason for those who emigrated to return, given economic and political instability. The vitality and very viability of

and feuds that disrupt families, communities and nations, stretching across the generations. Sometimes in family feuds people lose any sense of how the dispute began. Within Christianity, many Christian groups are at loggerheads – often exacerbated by political and economic factors. Reconciliation, far from being a possibility, is sometimes not even longed for. At the most intractable level, our world is beset by bitter conflicts that include all the aforementioned factors – from tribal conflicts, caste discrimination in India, the war in Afghanistan, the continuing conflict in the Middle East and the violence that carries on in the numerous cities.

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