



“God has broken down the dividing wall” (Eph 2)

A Conference about the impact of the Separation Barrier on the lives of ordinary people in Palestine, organised jointly by the Diocese of Leeds Justice and Peace Commission and the Leeds Pax Christi Group.



**Theological Reflection – God has broken
down the dividing wall.**

By

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This is the full text of the reflection that David gave as part of the conference.

26 September 2015



Ephesians 2 12-15.

“Now in Jesus Christ, you who used to be so far off have been brought close by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us and has made the two into one entity and broken down the wall which used to keep them apart, by destroying in his own person the hostility, that is the Law of commandments and its decrees. His purpose in this, was by restoring peace to create a single Humanity out of the two of them and through the cross to reconcile them both to God in one Body, in his own person he killed the hostility. He came to bring the good news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who are near.”

The extract from Ephesians that is the inspiration for this event speaks in uplifting terms of peace, and of the ending of hostility and of separated peoples being brought together.

It seems a forlorn hope, that the wall will be broken down. But stranger things have happened. One recent example is the reconciliation between Cuba and the USA. In 1973 Fidel Castro is reputed to have said that “the United States will sit down and talk with us when it has a black president and the world has a Latin American Pope.”

The wall in the passage read is not merely a physical barrier. It has both a physical and a psychological meaning. The historian **Josephus** tells us that there was a stone partition 3 cubits high separating the outer court of the Temple from the inner court. On this partition were signs prohibiting, under pain of death, any foreigner from going further. The Stone wall was but a token of a whole system of separation that went into every phase of life. Since the Jews were God’s holy, consecrated, people, they were to keep themselves from all defiling influences and the Law and its decrees were the means of doing this. As 2nd Century Greek Jew **Aristeas** wrote: “*Our Lawgiver fenced us round with impregnable ramparts and walls of iron that we might not mingle at all with any of the nations, but remain pure in body and soul*”. (1)

The psychological barrier made real contact between Jew and Gentile impossible. For fear of contamination from idols or foods sacrificed to idols, no Jew could eat with a Gentile or enter his home.

The passage from Ephesians is revolutionary thinking, in that it sees Jew and Gentile as equals before God, and prophesizes not so much the end of the Laws of God but the end of Legalism.

Over the centuries this passage found only limited acceptance. As the Christian Church came into ascendancy- claims of contamination shifted the other way - from Gentile to Jew. Injustice and persecution of the Jewish people culminating in the Holocaust. And now we see the same claims of purity and fear of contamination as a central plank of Islamic State.



At the end of the 20th Century it looked as if we were beginning to learn to do without walls and borders. We witnessed the destruction of the Berlin wall and the end of the Iron Curtain, the opening of the European borders in the Schengen zone. The Chinese Bamboo curtain was raised. It even looked hopeful that the 99 Belfast peace walls would come down.

But alas the motivation to build walls is ever strong. We are all very good at building walls, we build walls of fear and to protect us from contamination. Wall building is a quick fix for politicians under pressure. Keep them out. Separate, divide.

We are living in a new age of wall building.

Donald Trump promises to build a great wall along the border with Mexico. We see massive fences going up around the Channel Tunnel entrances, the new wall along the Hungarian Border the disregard of the Schengen treaty. As Anna Rowlands recently wrote in the Tablet we are beginning to see the image of a sclerotic Fortress Europe. and even closer to home many housing estates are now gated. You might well ask who are we to criticize Israel for its wall building when we are doing the same.



Nevertheless in the context of the current event Israel continues to extend its separation wall - it looks like the recent court case to halt the wall at Cremisan on the borders of Bethlehem, has failed.(2) And Israel is now building another 30-kilometre fence along the Jordanian border. (3)

The problem with reliance on walls to protect and separate us is that we start to lose contact with those on the other side of the wall. We start to make them into the enemy, to see them as less than ourselves, as the problem whose

lives are worth less than ours. Walls breed resentment, their military and economic cost is unsustainable.

Walls are never effective and are all indeed destined, in the long run to become tourist attractions.

Liberation Theology with its emphasis in values of justice and struggle against oppression is relevant to the Palestinian situation. These are values that lie at the heart of the Holy writings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

By encouraging people to reflect on their situation in the light of Holy Scriptures, liberation theology encourages us to see the world from the perspective of the oppressed and to join in their struggles. This implies an active pursuit of justice and resistance to oppression. Such theologies have played an effective role in reshaping the societies of Latin America, were instrumental in the fight against apartheid in South Africa and underpinned the destruction of Communism in Eastern Europe.

There are underlying theologies of Liberation in each of the faiths of the Holy Land. In the case of Catholic Christianity Liberation Theology has survived the stigma of and demonization attached to it



by its detractors, and indeed has been normalized by the Beatification of Oscar Romero and its endorsement by Pope Francis.

Liberation theology prompts Christians not to remain passive or indifferent to the plight of the poor and oppressed. Religion is not neutral. It exists to give safety and life and to save people from depravation.

Liberation theology in its theory and praxis can help to explain why the resistance movement in Palestine is important and why so many people of the world feel responsible about Palestine's oppressed society.

Liberation theologians view as inadequate notions of God derived from Greek philosophy which perceive God as distant and removed from human history. In contrast Liberation theology stresses the incomprehensible mystery of God who can be discovered in the course of human history. God is present as the crucified God whose being is submerged in the dark world of misery. God is found on the crosses of the oppressed, not just in the bright light of beauty and wisdom. The movement that became known as "Liberation Theology" began with an awareness that it is blasphemous to care for people's souls whilst ignoring their needs for food, shelter and human dignity. As Jesus participated in the suffering of the poor, and proclaimed to them the good news of justice and freedom, so must today's church engage in the struggle for justice.

In his reflection on the Universality of Liberation Theology the Islamic theologian "**Saied Ameli**" (4) suggests that liberation theology requires three major elements to work as a universal force, and hence be applicable in the Palestinian situation and other 'global and collective problems' which are related to oppressed society'

The first element is a return to God. Whether Muslims, Christians or Jew, we all believe we are creatures, that we fair from God. If we are not fair to God, we cannot be fair to ourselves and we cannot be fair to others. The liberation of Palestinians, will come about when they too are seen as creatures of God by those oppressing them. To do this other followers of faith must be liberated from, and force 'the international Community to liberate (the idea of) God from any 'Chosen Community' attachment. The only Chosen people are the oppressed and the poor. This is why today, Palestinians should be considered "A Chosen Oppressed Community.

The second element that Ameli suggest is Selflessness. The minimization of personal desires, and dogmatic attachments to nationality, ethnicity and even religion is a major requirement for caring for the oppressed and poor people. This is not only about the selfishness of us as individuals but the collective selfish of 'isms' such as Eurocentrism, Americocentrism, Zionism, Militarism, Legalism or Islamism which ultimately requires the demolition and destruction of 'others' for the price of supporting the self. Thus the Palestinian problem becomes a global issue for all human beings who care about others.

The Centrality of Justice is the third element that Ameli suggests. The concept of Justice and treating others as we would wish to be treated is at the heart of Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures.



One major source of such reflection on the Palestinian situation is “A Moment of Truth” the Kairos Statement – the statement released in December 2009 by the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem on behalf of the Christian communities of the Holy Land. I am sure most here will be familiar with that document. (5)

It was a call for the International Community to stand by the Palestinian people who have faced oppression, displacement, suffering and clear apartheid for more than six decades.

The church leaders are unequivocal in declaring the military occupation of Palestine a sin against God and against humanity, and also holds that non-violent resistance to this injustice is not only a right but a duty for

all Palestinians including Christians.

It mirrors a similar document – the South Africa Kairos Document launched in 1985 which proved to be influential in the struggle of South Africans against the oppression they faced.

In *A Moment of Truth* the separation wall is cited as a major cause of injustice.

It says”

The separation wall erected on Palestinian territory, a large part of which has been confiscated for this purpose, has turned our towns and villages into prisons, separating them from one another, making them dispersed into divided cantons.

The document itemizes all the other problems faced by the Palestinian people which we are familiar with today.

To the Christians of the Holy Land, their Land has a universal mission. God sent the patriarchs, the prophets and the apostles of the three Abrahamic faith’s to this land and there is ever urgent call is for this land to be a land of reconciliation, peace and love.

From the point of the Palestinians it appears that the West has sought to make amends for what the Jews endured in the countries of Europe at the expense of the Palestinians’ land. The attempt to correct one injustice resulted in a new injustice.

Despite the awful history of the British in the land the people still have a great hope that our country’s influence will make a difference. I recall very vividly visiting a small Palestinian village centred around the tomb of Zachariah. As we walked into the village a very elderly women waved us over and said Oh I see you are British, I was here when you came through here in 1946. Its all your fault. Sit down and drink coffee with me.

If you have visited the Holy Land you will know how hope in a better future does remain strong. But as you will also know that hope is growing very thin. I will never forget the conversation I had after Mass in Bethlehem, when I was talking to an elderly man and told him that one of the purposes of our visit was to keep the knowledge of what was happening in their land and to their people alive in



Britain and the West, so that they would not be forgotten. His salutary comment was – yes I have been hearing that message of over 60 years. But nothing ever changes.



In early September when I was thinking about this session, that very sad and poignant picture of Aylan Kurdi – the three-year old Syrian boy washed up on the shores of Turkey had just been published and at least for a while our politicians were stimulated into responding. At the same time on social media – Yousef Munayyer posted the following message.

“As a Palestinian I can tell you this much if pictures of dead kids really did stir global conscience Palestine would have been free long ago”.

These are thoughts mirrors those in the Kairos document:

“Yes, the initiatives, the conferences, visits and negotiations have multiplied, but they have not been followed up by any change in our situation and suffering.”

Despite this the hope of the Christian leaders remains strong , because their hope is from God. They have a faith rooted in the unquenchable believe that God alone is good, almighty and loving and that his goodness will one day be victorious over the evil in which they find themselves.

In the words of the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs every religion must wrestle with its dark angels, and so today must we, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. For we are all children of Abraham and only when we make space for one another as brothers and sisters will we redeem the world from darkness and walk together in the light of God. (6)

References:

- (1) The Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1968
- (2) The Guardian 18 Aug 2015
- (3) www.haaretz.com 06 September 2015
- (4) Towards a New Liberation Theology: Reflections on Palestine. Ed's Arzu Merali and Javad Sharbaf. 2009 Islamic Human Rights Commission.
- (5) A Moment of Truth. Kairos Palestine, 2009
- (6) House of Lord's Hansard: 30 October 2014



Additional Information is available in many places. Here are a few starting points:-

Diocese of Leeds Justice & Peace Commission website

There are pages on the J&P website specifically related to Palestine and events there.

<http://www.leedsjp.org.uk/campaigns/palestine/>

Sabeel

Sabeel works for a just peace for the people of Palestine and Israel. Started by Palestinian Christians, Sabeel promotes non-violence and reconciliation. **Friends of Sabeel UK** is working in Britain to support that vision. There is a Yorkshire group and they hold regular events.

<http://www.friendsofsabeel.org.uk/>

Pax Christi

The continuing struggle for justice in Palestine is a continuing priority for Pax Christi, which in May 2015 held its International Assembly in Bethlehem. They have many good campaigning resources and background briefings – as well as links to many other websites that are rich sources of information.

<http://paxchristi.org.uk/campaigns/israel-and-palestine/resources-and-documents/>

+972 Magazine

This is a blog-based magazine. They describe themselves as a group of journalists, bloggers and photographers whose goal is to provide fresh, original, on-the-ground reporting and analysis of events in Israel and Palestine. Their collective is committed to human rights and freedom of information, and they oppose the occupation. However, +972 Magazine does not represent any organization, political party or specific agenda.

<http://972mag.com/>



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