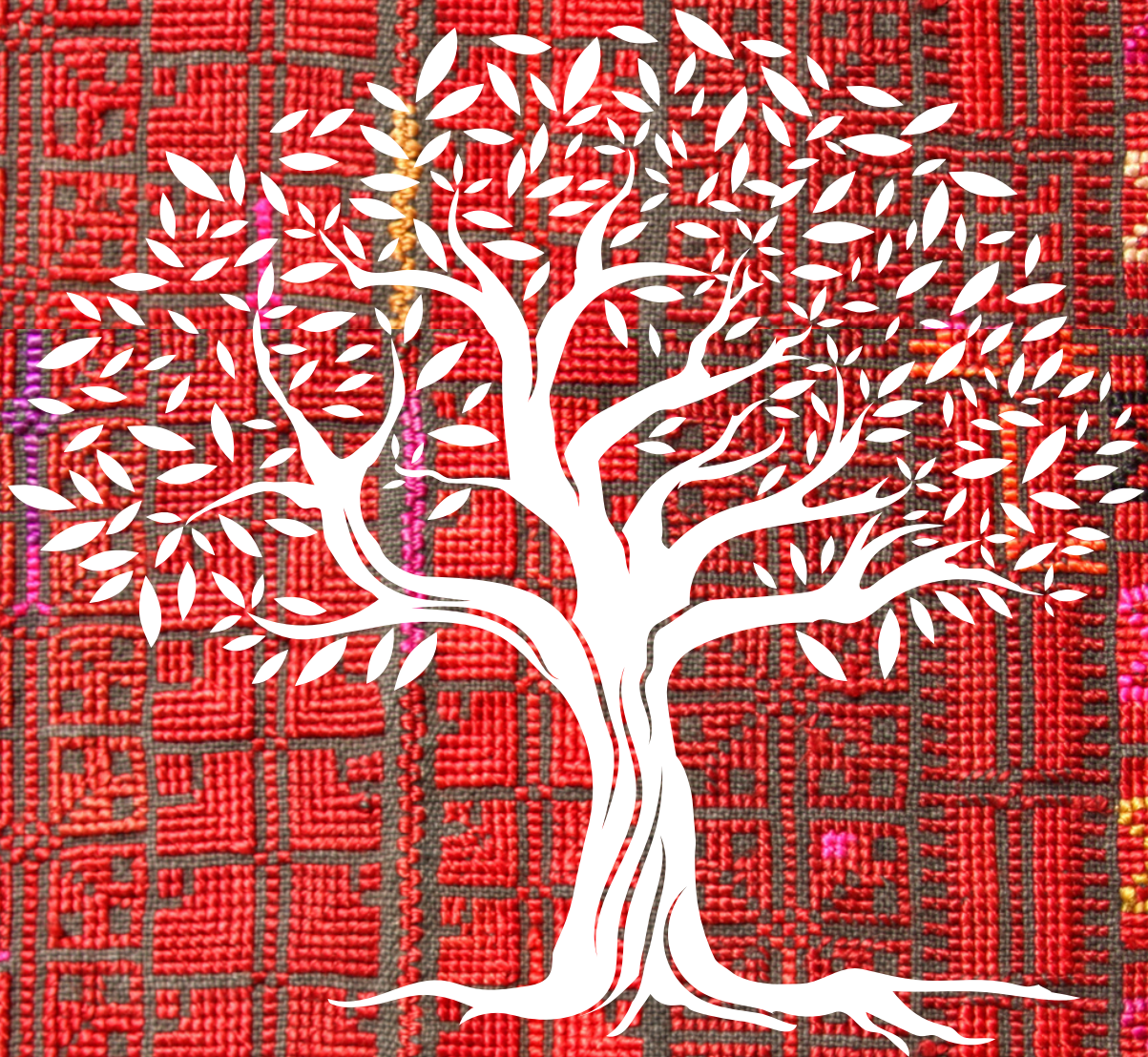


WA Day of Prayer with the Holy Land



Uniting Church in Australia
Social Justice WA

A LETTER FROM THE MODERATOR

It has been a year now since the latest conflict in the Middle East has yet again flared up. In that time we have stood in solidarity with the Jewish community, who saw their young people killed at a music festival, as well as children and families killed in or taken captive from their homes. We have also supported Palestinians, Christian and Muslim alike, as they faced the bombing of homes, schools, churches, and hospitals. Closer to home, we have seen with horror the killing of journalists and aid workers, including an aid worker from Australia.

In March the Uniting Church Assembly resolved to advocate for peace and justice in the Holy Land. This resolution supports advocacy and peace work being conducted by the Middle Eastern Council of Churches, as well as calling out all “the acts of brutality and atrocities committed.” It also calls for congregations in the Uniting Church in Australia to pray for a just peace and to support those who are living in “grief and fear in their communities as a result of the current escalation in the conflict and acts of racial and religious hatred happening in Australia”.

This worship resource is to educate and support your congregation in responding to the Assembly’s call. Please join us in praying that all who look towards Jerusalem, the city of peace, as a sacred city, may live in a just peace. It uses the lectionary readings for Sunday 17th November, however if this date does not suit your planning, you are encouraged to use these materials at another time.

At the conclusion of writing these resources, the war has spread. This week there have been bombings in the Lebanese capital, Beirut. Civilians have been attacked in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv. Israeli forces are making their way into the southern regions of Lebanon. Civilians on all sides have had to flee their homes. By focusing these resources on Gaza, we do not wish to minimise the sufferings of others elsewhere in the Holy Lands. We pray for all who are affected by this war and pray that people may wage peace in the same intensity as others have waged war.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ian Tozer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev Dr Ian Tozer
Moderator.
Uniting Church, Synod of Western Australia

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Prayer for Palestine</i>	3
<i>Background</i>	4
The UN Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People	4
World Council of Churches and Palestine.....	4
Uniting Church in Australia	5
<i>Creative Engagement</i>	6
<i>Hymn Suggestions</i>	7
<i>Liturgy</i>	7
Call to Worship.....	7
Acknowledgement of country	7
Confession.....	7
Introduction to the theme.....	9
Readings	9
Prayer of Intercession	9
Benediction & Blessing.....	10
<i>Sermon Starters</i>	11
1 Samuel 1:4-20	11
1 Samuel 2:1-10.....	11
Hebrews 10: 11-14 (15-18) 19-25	11
Mark 13: 1-8	12
<i>Activities in Solidarity</i>	18
<i>Context from a Palestinian-Christian Perspective</i>	12
<i>Further Resources</i>	18

INTRODUCTION

The Social Justice Commission of the Uniting Church in WA invites congregations, schools and agencies to choose a day in November to pray with the people of the Holy Land, including our Palestinian-Christian sisters and brothers. This resource is based on the lectionary readings for 17 November, the 26th Sunday after Pentecost. The Sunday foreshadows Advent and comes immediately before the Reign of Christ Sunday.

As we approach the end of the church year, we prepare to respond to the birth of a Child who will bring about a new world. What Good News can we hear through the din of war and the cries of the people? What might we in Australia perceive as visions and messages from Palestine and others from the margins? What world are we anticipating?

On this Day of Prayer we are invited to look at those who have long dwelt in the Holy Land as a marginalised community to whom Christ Jesus, sovereign of the universe spoke and still speaks. On this day, we consider the Palestinian stance of *sumud*, or perseverance. Rather than passively accepting injustice and how it tramples on the vulnerable, *sumud* refers to the costly discipleship and solidarity that requires discernment and courage in faith.

Following a mandate of the Presbytery of WA and the Uniting Church Assembly, the Social Justice Commission has prepared these resources in collaboration with our neighbours, the Palestinian Christians in Australia (WA). It has been an honour to walk alongside them at this difficult time.

Attention in the Holy Land is not new. In 2024 we marked the 77th year since the United Nations passed a resolution which provided for the establishment in Palestine of a “Jewish State” and an “Arab State”. It has been 76 years since the Nakba (“Catastrophe”) expulsion of 750,000 Arab Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.¹



Figure 1 Kairos Palestine is a Christian Palestinian movement, formed in 2009 to advocate for the ending of Israeli occupation and a just peace in the Holy Land.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is often characterised as a religious conflict between Jewish and Muslim groups. Standing in solidarity with Palestinian Christians reminds us that this is not the case. In 1948 Christians made up around 10% of the population; today it's around 1% as Palestinian Christians continue to experience the catastrophe in particular ways, including the recent forcible eviction of the last Christian family in Al-Makhroun near Bethlehem.

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/message-on-international-day-of-solidarity-with-the-palestinian-people> Nov. 29, 2007, accessed 7 August 2024. Also <https://www.oikoumene.org/countries/israel-and-palestine>

“Inspired by the mystery of God's love for all, the mystery of God's divine presence in the history of all peoples and, in a particular way, in the history of our country, we proclaim our word based on our Christian faith and our sense of Palestinian belonging – a word of faith, hope and love.”

*World Council of Churches, Kairos Palestine Document 2009*²

As members of the world community, churches are privileged to work and witness among people on the ground. Together with them, we seek to increase chances for life in dignity and sustainable communities for the people on the ground. We call on the Spirit to transform not only of our hearts and ways of knowing, but also our systems of politics and public life. We stand against the false prophets of anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia.

We are “entrusted with a message of life and hope message of life and hope that can dispel suspicion and paralysing fears and set people free to gain courage and confidence in their capacity to transform their lives in community”.³

As we have been writing this resource, the conflict has continued to evolve and to affect more and more people. We cannot foresee what this conflict will look like by 17th November. You are encouraged to adapt the resource as is relevant to your congregation, and as required by a new context.

² <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/kairos-palestine-document>

³ <https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-un-reform>

PRAYER FOR PALESTINE

Written by Sub-Deacon Jason Damouni

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

O God of Justice and Mercy, we, Your faithful gathered here in Western Australia, come before You with hearts heavy for our brothers and sisters in Palestine. We lift up our voices in prayer, knowing that You are the defender of the oppressed and the hope of the weary. For 76 long years, the Palestinian people have endured suffering, displacement, and the pain of being stateless, facing injustice upon injustice. Yet, their hope remains, and so does our prayer for them.

Lord, as we witness the spread of false narratives and propaganda, seeking to erase the truth of their struggle, we ask for Your strength and guidance. Protect the people of Palestine from the forces that would distort their story and deny their right to freedom and dignity. Let not the voices of those who seek to oppress drown out the cries of those who long for justice.

Grant us, here in Western Australia, the courage to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine, to be voices for truth and instruments of peace. Help us to resist the temptation to be silent in the face of injustice, and instead, to speak with the boldness that comes from knowing Your love and Your truth. May our prayers rise like incense before You, a beacon of hope and solidarity that crosses oceans and borders.

O Christ, our defender, shine Your light upon all who suffer under oppression and occupation. Pour out Your Spirit upon the leaders of nations, that their hearts may be moved toward justice, that their eyes may see the humanity of every child and family who has been denied a place to call home. Soften hardened hearts, Lord, and open their minds to the path of peace and reconciliation.

We pray for those in Palestine who endure daily struggles, those who have lost loved ones, those who dream of returning to the land of their ancestors, and those who remain steadfast in the face of violence and aggression. Grant them comfort in their grief, strength in their struggles, and hope that does not fade.

Let Your justice flow like a mighty river, O Lord, breaking down the walls of division, and bringing peace to the Holy Land—peace that recognizes the dignity of every human being, peace that comes from Your hand. May we, in Western Australia, be instruments of Your peace, reflecting Your love for all people, and standing as witnesses to the truth that no propaganda can erase.

For You are the God of the oppressed, the shelter of the vulnerable, and the hope of the hopeless. And to You, we offer our prayers,

Now and always, and forever and ever. Amen.

Jason Christopher Damouni, is a Palestinian Christian currently residing in Perth. He was born in New York but his family come from the village of Al-Damoun, a small Christian village between Nazareth and Haifa. Jason is a sub-deacon in his local Melkite Catholic Church in Perth, and the Communications Director of Palestinian Christians in Australia (PCiA).

BACKGROUND

The UN Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People

Close to 80 years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 181 (II), now known as the Partition Resolution on 29 November 1947. The resolution provided for the establishment in Palestine of a "Jewish State" and an "Arab State", with Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum* under a special international regime. Of the two States to be created under this resolution, only one, Israel, has so far come into being. The Australian government supports this two-state solution. Since then, 139 out of 193 U.N. member states have recognized Palestinian statehood.⁴

The International Day of Solidarity traditionally provides an opportunity for the international community to focus its attention on the fact that the question of Palestine remains unresolved and that the Palestinian people have yet to attain their inalienable rights as defined by the General Assembly, namely,

- the right to self-determination without external interference,
- the right to national independence and sovereignty, and
- the right to return to their homes and property.

The global Palestinian population is 13.5 million. As of 2020, 5 million remained in the West Bank and Gaza, primarily in the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel since 1967. They are also in neighbouring countries and in refugee camps around the world. Close to 16,000 people with Palestinian heritage live in Australia.⁵

Palestinian Christians in Israel are concentrated in the Galilee in northern Israel, and around Jaffa and Lod in central Israel. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Christian communities are predominantly in the regions of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah, with smaller numbers in other towns. With the war, the Christian community in Gaza has been decimated.

Alongside the threat to people's lives, this conflict threatens the continuation of rich church traditions among Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants.

World Council of Churches and Palestine

The World Council of Churches seeks to keep the Occupation and the situation of the Palestinian people before the International Community. This attention has never been more urgently needed, nor more difficult, as we enter the first Anniversary of the War on Gaza, a war that is now spreading to threaten other peoples in the region.

The WCC launched the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF) in 2007 to:

catalyze [sic] and co-ordinate new and existing church advocacy for peace, aimed at ending the illegal occupation [of Palestinian territories] in

⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/map-shows-countries-support-palestinian-state-1872755>, accessed 27 September 2024.

⁵ <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/palestinian-culture/palestinian-culture-population-statistics>, accessed 27 Sept 2024.

accordance with UN resolutions, and demonstrate its commitment to inter-religious action for peace and to justice that serves all peoples of the region.⁶

Through this forum, the WCC calls churches around the world to engage with the Palestinian Christian in ecumenical fellowship, build moral community, and bear public witness which are essential to being church, the Body of Christ.⁷

Uniting Church in Australia⁸

Through the years, the Uniting Church in Australia has responded to appeals from the WCC and the Middle East Council of Churches, as well as Kairos Palestine⁹.

Since October 2023, more than 1,100 Israelis and more than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed. More than 16,000 of these have been children. Many thousands more have been injured in both Israel and Palestine.¹⁰

In March 2024, the Uniting Church's Assembly Standing Committee resolved to:

- Commit the Uniting Church to support the Middle East Council of Churches in their advocacy.
- Condemn all atrocities and acts of brutality which make peace efforts impossible.
- Welcome measures taken by the Australian Government to offer humanitarian assistance and advocate for an end to the conflict.
- Call on the Australian Government to do all it can to facilitate a just peace in the Holy Land including supporting the International Court of Justice in its measures to prevent genocide, supporting peace-making organisations and imposing targeted sanctions.
- Call on the Israeli Government to end extrajudicial killings and impunity for members of the Israeli security forces and settlers that murder Palestinians and to abolish the practice of detaining Palestinians without charge.

In September this year, Uniting Church President, Rev Charissa Suli, called for a Week of Prayer for Palestine and Israel, saying that the church "continues to grieve the absence of peace and justice in Israel and Palestine".

In writing this resource with a focus on Palestine, we acknowledge the war has since spread. This focus is not to take away our empathy with all people in suffering in this conflict. Rather it shows how innocent people – men, women, and children, of all aged – have been affected by this ongoing conflict. Peace cannot come without justice; therefore let us commit ourselves as followers of Christ to wage peace.

⁶ <https://www.oikoumene.org/countries/israel-and-palestine#:~:text=The%20programme%20Palestine%20Israel%20Ecumenical,and%20demonstrate%20its%20commitment%20to>, accessed 10 October 2024.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/countries/israel-and-palestine> accessed 27 Sept 2024

⁷ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/irom.12128>

⁸ <https://palestinianchristians.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/uniting-church-australia-Palestine.pdf>

⁹ In 2009 Christians from different denominations in West Bank and Gaza came together and formed Kairos Palestine, a prophetic voice to the world <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/> .

¹⁰ <https://uniting.church/president-world-week-for-peace/>

CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Words are only one way of reflecting and learning about an issue; for many people creative and non-verbal input is also important. You may like to consider decorations that include symbols of the people of Palestine.

Olive trees/branches

Olive trees have been grown in the Middle East for thousands of years. Indeed, there are olive groves and even some individual trees that date back to the time of Jesus. In the Bible, olive leaves or branches are seen as a symbol of peace and hope.

Watermelon

The colours of the watermelon – red, green, black, and white – are the colours of the Palestinian flag. Over the last year the watermelon has become more than a tasty treat; it is also a symbolism of solidarity with the civilians suffering in Palestine and particularly in Gaza.

The Dove

The dove is a common symbol of peace and it is also used in the Bible as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. These are the lands where Jesus walked, taught, preached, and healed. These are the lands where the Holy Spirit was first experienced. Now the descendants of these first Christians are being pushed out of their ancestral lands.

Palestinian Textiles and Art

Imagery of Palestinian textiles and art is available on the internet and helps connect the congregation to the real people who are experiencing the atrocities at this time.

Photos of Palestine

A limited range of photos are included in the PowerPoint presentation. Further images of the people today are also available on the internet.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

Together in Song

81	Out of the depths I cry	657	God of freedom
262	When pain and terror	665	Jesus Christ is waiting
414	There's a spirit in the air	667	How shall I sing to God?
416	Great God, your Spirit	674	Inspired by love and anger
473	Community of Christ	677	Christ's is the world
602	O love that will not let me go	679	God of Jeremiah grieving
618	What does the Lord require	689	Lord, hear my praying
629	When I needed a neighbour	690	Beauty for brokenness
630	The Law of Christ	697	All the sleepy

LITURGY

Call to Worship

The ancients cried to God,
they cried for relief from their oppression,
for freedom from captivity,
and for hope for a future.

Today we join in that cry
with the people of the Holy Land,
especially with those people who have been
dispossessed from their lands
and have had their rights taken away.

As we cry for their freedom,
we also do as the ancients did,
and we worship God.

Acknowledgement of country

As we remember the Palestinian peoples, we are also aware of the First Nations in our own country. We know we are not the first people to walk this land. We acknowledge the _____ people of the _____ Nation who have cared for this place since time immemorial.

We give thanks for and pray for their Elders past and present.

Confession

Loving God,
as we pray for the peoples of the Holy Land,
we also confess the ways
in which we have – knowingly or unknowingly –
contributed to the problem.

We also live in a colonised land but we –
the second and subsequent peoples –
are the colonisers.

It is hard to listen to the cries of the Palestinian peoples
when those cries hold up a mirror to us
about injustices in our land.

**God of all people,
forgive us, we pray.**

Our Western history
Is also a history of oppression of Jewish people,
so we feel the weight of our guilt
that Jewish people feel too unsafe to live among us.

It becomes easier
to turn a blind eye
to the state-sanctioned dispossession
of Palestinian peoples
than to face the reality
of our own history.

**God of all people,
forgive us, we pray.**

We misuse our Sacred story of Chosen People
to justify the takeover of the land
from those who have also lived there
since the times of our earliest stories.

We conveniently forget
our Sacred story includes the commands
to commit genocide;
but the Palestinians survived that genocide
and continue to bear witness
to our uncomfortable stories.

**God of all people,
forgive us, we pray.**

We also forget
that among the people of the Holy Land
we find our sisters and brothers in Christ,
the earliest of us to be people of the Way;
we fail to see them as they live among us
seeking safety and new lives
in these colonised land, Australia.

In their story
we find our story
and have been offered hope
of our relationship with you.

**God of all people,
forgive us, we pray.**

Forgive us, God of hope,
help us to hear the cries of your people
and bring us into new relationship
with them and with you.
Amen.

Words of Assurance

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,” (Heb 10:16)

Know that God offers forgiveness through Christ
and we are brought through every obstacle
back into relationship with God:
you are loved, you are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

Introduction to the theme

Imagine you only had half an hour to pack up and escape your home. There are many different reasons why a person might need to do this, fleeing warfare and violence is only one reason.

Ask people to quickly write a list of what they would take with them.

Have a look at your list and imagine it is now 10 or more years after fleeing your home and you have not been able to go back. What would you most like to have taken, if you knew you were leaving long term?

Imagine you fled your home as a young couple. Now you are looking at your grandchildren. What in your home would you most wish you could pass on to them?

Readings

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10 (instead of Psalm)

Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

Prayer of Intercession

As we pause to reflect
on who we are and whose we are,
we also come with a sense of gratitude
acknowledging the good gifts we have been given
and praying for those many people
who today do not have these gifts,
especially the people of Palestine
and others impacted by this escalating conflict.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land
And all those affected by this unholy war.

As they leave their homes
in search of food and water
not knowing what will be there
when they return,
or if their homes will be flattened
by bombs that fall like rain.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land
And all those affected by this unholy war.

As families strive to protect and nurture
their children,
not knowing if they can
comfort their love ones
who try to sleep on empty bellies.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land
And all those affected by this unholy war.

As communities struggle to give
an education for their children,

yet see schools bombed and destroyed,
or at best taken over
to shelter families
who have lost their houses.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land
And all those affected by this unholy war.

As people live in fear
and do not know
if they will wake in the morning
or make it through the day alive,
because they are surrounded by war
and just want to live in peace.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land
And all those affected by this unholy war.

We pray for all people who long for peace,
knowing that peace is not merely the absence of war,
but a society where justice for all
means that all may flourish.

We pray for the people of the Holy Land
And all those affected by this unholy war.

We pray for ourselves and all Christian Churches
around the world
and all those who long for justice,
knowing that justice
is an expression of love for humanity.

**We pray for ourselves and the people of the Holy Land.
Amen**

Benediction & Blessing

Peace be with you.
And also with you.

May you always carry that hope of peace
wherever you go in the world,
remembering that hope of peace
calls you into active partnership with God
to respond to the pain of the world
until there truly is peace on earth
and goodwill to all.

And God, who rescued
the oppressed from slavery is always with you;
Christ, the Human One,
companions you through all that it is to be human;
and the Spirit breathes new life
and new hope into your being.

Amen

SERMON STARTERS

1 Samuel 1:4-20

Hannah's longings for a child are dismissed as those of a drunken barren woman. She is shamed and silenced, seen to be less deserving of joy and human relationship. The priest Eli is unable to change the situation. By advocating for herself and by refusing to be excluded and marginalized, Hannah changes the story of God's people. Hannah perseveres with hope/*sumud*, and through her God continues creative and saving work.

God sees and hears Hannah, and she bears Samuel, a child who will be a blessing to the people. Samuel will lead the people through a difficult journey, a new way of life, a different way of politics and decision-making.

We are sometimes faced with the questions: why don't the Palestinians simply escape from the fighting? Why would some of them even support those who fight the occupiers of their land?

The first fruits of new creation are tender and easily trampled. How might we stand alongside those who resist? How do we challenge those who deny the movements of God's Spirit of life, peace and justice?

1 Samuel 2:1-10

(This Psalm selection known as the Song of Hannah)

Hannah's song is echoed by Mary in her Magnificat.

It is a praise song of someone who has been transformed from someone who is silenced, hopeless, and ungifted to one given a child, hopeful and loud in praise of God.

Hannah is transformed from barrenness to abundance. What is personal becomes communal and public.

In her life she sees a reversal of social power, where the last becomes first.

For Hannah, the God of life, knows, governs, decides and assesses. God takes sides — lifting the poor, raising the needy, bringing them to well-being. God the source of life generates new possibilities in every aspect of life. If we are called to imitate Christ who bore the image of God, how might we take the way of Christ?

Hebrews 10: 11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Christ has offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins. There is no need to suffer or cause others to suffer. Through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, Christ has opened for us the way, a living way. The Spirit softens our hearts to the law written on our hearts and minds. (Hebrews 10:16 Jer. 31:33)

The readers of the letter are called to—

- Hold fast to the hope in the one who is faithful (v.23)
- Provoke one another to love and good deeds (v.24)

- Meet and encourage one another, cultivate personal friendships that overcome cultural and other boundaries towards creating an ecumenical network (vv. 24-25).

These actions of discipleship entail costly solidarity. In the face of conflict, it would mean taking non-violent, constructive actions even if it creates discomfort, tensions, and serious disagreements. We ask God to grant us a heart of humility and peace.

Such solidarity is an ethical imperative. This follows the way of Jesus who sided with the poor, the excluded, the vulnerable, and the exploited. He preached and acted on this preferential option even if it brought the ire of religious and political power of his time.

Mark 13: 1-8

When we focus on destruction of the temple and the apocalypse, we focus on the ending rather than on the new beginnings. Jesus points us to the new beginnings (*Parousia*). In the meantime, Christ enables us to persevere in the face of trials and not to be led astray by false prophets.

As powerful forces seek to seize our loyalty, we could ask ourselves who and whose are we? In whom do we believe and how do we express our faith in daily life?

The kingdom is a gift; its full realisation is the very work of God. As partakers in the life of the Trinity, the members of the church are called to be co-workers with God (1 Cor. 3:9) to carry out Kingdom values in the world.¹¹ It is a sin and a heresy to justify oppression and injustice using biblical and theological statements.

It is in the Kingdom of God that both the church and the whole of humanity have their goal. As Christians, we look forward to the Kingdom with hope. Although we know that our own striving does not bring about the rule of God, the church's life as a witnessing and serving community is part of its coming.

Pray:

Emmanuel, God-with-us, as we approach the seasons of Advent and Christmas, help us discern how best to be witnesses to your promise of liberation and justice for the oppressed.

God of peace, encourage us to hold a prophetic voice in our words and deeds, that we may boldly speak against the injustices of this world. Turn our eyes and our feet toward your Reign of shalom.

Amen

¹¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/costly-commitment>, accessed 3 October 2024.

CONTEXT FROM A PALESTINIAN-CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Written by Sub-Deacon Jason Damouni

As the world continues to witness endless destruction in Gaza, it is more crucial today than ever before to understand the root of the conflict — demography. In particular, as Palestinian Australians, perhaps we have an even greater obligation to raise awareness about this humanitarian catastrophe.

This is because Australia participated in the frequently referenced Battle of Beersheba (1917) which helped the British Empire conquer Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, and two days later, came the Balfour Declaration which meant that life for Palestinians would never be the same.

The reality is military confrontations are not the drivers of the conflict. They are driven by the conflict. If underlying political disputes are left unresolved for too long, things tend to culminate into what the world has come to witness over the past twelve months.

This conflict is born out of the desire of an overseas-born population (minority) to build a country on a geographically remote territory that could not have been established without ending up causing continued disadvantage to the native-born population (majority).

When Jewish people living in Europe began migrating into historic Palestine starting from 1882, the local Jewish population accounted for less than 8% of the total. This ratio remained constant over coming decades until the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

The term 'Jewish state' gets thrown around a lot and, truth be told, the average person might well think, what's wrong with the idea of a Jewish state? After all, there is a *French state*, a *Chinese state*, why *shouldn't* there be a *Jewish state*?

And in theory, their reasoning would be perfectly valid. The issue is, one cannot build a so-called 'Jewish' state without a Jewish demographic majority because the demographics of a state are what determine the symbols, customs, and ceremonies represented in the official state branding and institutions.

Imposing such an institutional framework on top of a non-Jewish majority that makes up 92% of the population would have been impractical, unsustainable and, dare one say, outright immoral. Not because that majority despised Jewish people, so to speak, but because it was the *majority*. Those non-Jewish people living on that specific land had their own symbols, customs, and ceremonies. They were Levantine-Arabic speakers who were diverse but saw each other as Palestinian Arabs who were beginning to form a national consciousness and identity of their own.

In order for a Jewish state to be built on that land, not only did it necessitate a mass influx of Jewish arrivals, but it also necessitated a mass exodus of the native-born Levantine Arabs in order to achieve a Jewish demographic majority required for a Jewish state.

This is why proposals, dating back to 1895, to transfer the Palestinian Arabs into Jordan next door, among other destinations, was always an attractive thought in Jewish nationalist imagination. In *'International Proposals to Transfer Arabs from Palestine, 1895-1947: A Historical Survey'* Rabbi Chaim Simons documents proposals to transfer Palestinians out of the land. In the early days, the defining question for Palestinian Arab leaders and scholars was to determine how exactly to respond to this Jewish nationalist project.



There is no denying that Jewish people had a presence in ancient times on this land, which to them was Judea, is now called Israel. Christian and Muslim Palestinians alike are required through Biblical and Quranic mandates to recognise that Prophet Moses (Musa) led the ancient Israelites out of Egypt from Pharaonic bondage, that Joshua (Yusha) led them into the Holy Land, that Kings David (Dawood) and Solomon (Suleiman) established a Kingdom in Jerusalem (Al-Quds) and built a noble sanctuary there. We too often hear from propagandists that Palestinians are allegedly “denying” Jewish history and connection to the land. In reality this accusation is clearly untrue. We are obliged to recognise all this Israelite history.

However, having a historic connection alone doesn't automatically imply that one group of people asserts its ascendancy on a piece of territory at the expense of the other. Recall for comparison's sake that nobody would dispute that Zoroastrians from India originated in ancient Persia, now Iran — a Shi'ite Islamic nation with a Muslim majority population and Muslim rule.

If Zoroastrians in India were to start a movement to establish a *Zoroastrian* state in Iran based on this ancient claim and to resettle the area through a mass influx of Zoroastrian migrants, that would naturally cause a few issues with the local Shi'ite Muslims who today call Iran home.

Societies have changed character rather frequently throughout history. Britain which is now a Christian Anglican country was once entirely a pagan one. If there was a group of people around today who saw themselves as descendants of the ancient Celtic Druids who wanted to turn modern Britain into a Druid pagan nation again, that too would cause a few issues.

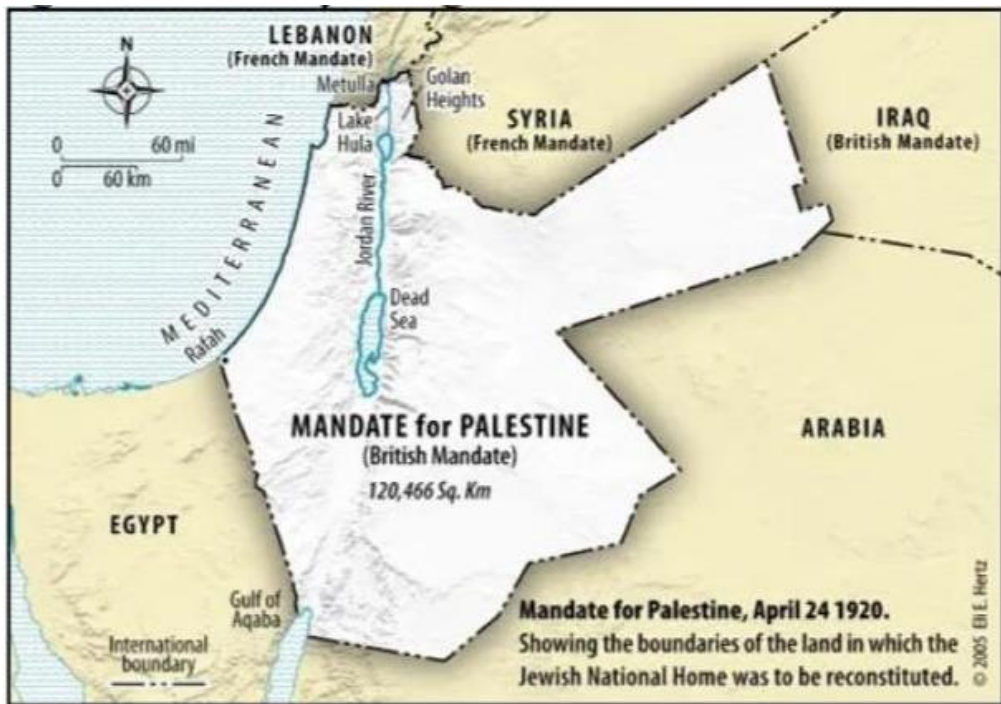
Would all this mean that modern Shi'ite Iranians are inherently anti-Zoroastrian? Or that modern Anglican Brits are inherently anti-Celtic? Or could we just accept that perhaps majority communities have a right to ensure their own self-preservation on land they already inhabit?

Around the world, we see democracies with representative governments and elected leaders that enable the citizens to participate in key decisions making the choice to open their borders and allow migrants to come in when it suits them, and later choosing to limit migration when it suits them.

We see plenty of populist movements across the European Union where mass migration has been at the centre of heated political debates in recent decades. We note in these instances the strongly held sentiment that mass migration must be curtailed in order for countries like Poland, Hungary, Germany, France or Britain to be preserved as they are.

Countless critics in these nations openly say they have nothing personal against Muslims but they would rather their cities not turn into Damascus and Baghdad. Britain went down this path in 2016 when its majority voted for what was then known as the Brexit campaign, to allow Britain to opt out of the European Union and choose an independent migration policy.

It is evident through these examples that democracies around the world become both pro-migration as well as anti-migration depending on the circumstances at hand. Yet in each case, the factor that remains in place is public opinion. The citizens of these nations are not treated like statistics on a database. They are treated as real people with minds of their own that deserve to have a say on immigration policy. Isn't that the entire point of democracy? Something Western nations are very good at preaching.



Yet Palestinians in 1917 were afforded no such luxuries. The decision to impose a Jewish homeland on us was made by outsiders with no consultation with the locals. This might explain why Sir Arthur Balfour did not put the question of statehood to a referendum in 1917.

He made an executive decision and then wrote a letter announcing it to Lord Rothschild as if his will took priority over 92% of the non-Jewish inhabitants of historic Palestine.

Referendums were not unheard of in 1917. Recall that Australia held two referendums in that exact timeframe. So the British Empire clearly knew a thing or two about democracy and winning over public support.

Australian troops had committed to serving in World War I (1914-1918) at the behest of the British Empire and additional soldiers were needed for recruitment, with very poor turnout on a voluntary basis. So the government held a first referendum on bringing on military conscription on 28th October 1916 and later on 20th November 1917. Both these referendums were resoundingly defeated.

If the Australian government could not justify making such an executive decision as to require the public to enlist for military service without public approval, why should the British government in historic Palestine have had the authority to just declare that they would help establish a Jewish homeland there without putting this question to the public?

Palestinian literacy at the time has not been adequately acknowledged. We had scholars, poets and an established press which lies at the root of our national identity. By 1908, we had established the Al-Karmil Newspaper and by 1911, the Falastin Newspaper. Both these newspapers were founded by Palestinian Christians and dedicated to spreading awareness about the need to preserve Palestinian society as it was, which is really no different from modern day Shi'ite Iranians wanting to preserve Iran as it is, rather than allowing it to become Zoroastrian again, and not dissimilar from the British that voted for Brexit in 2016.

Historic Palestine was a Levantine Arabic-speaking cosmopolitan society made up of Melkites, Maronites, Orthodox, Circassians, Armenians, Druze, Alawites, Shi'ites, Sunnis and of course local Sephardic Jews who had a local Chief Rabbinate, their own ecclesiastical courts and community institutions.

Everyone, for the most part, lived peaceably side-by-side as neighbours. The rapid influx of mass migrants of European and Russian Jewish variety disrupted the organic make-up of Palestinian society. If an independent state had been declared in historic Palestine in 1917, such a state would have ended up being a case of minority rule. It would have been unrepresentative and dysfunctional.

This desire to become the demographic majority of the population is what has led to the present circumstances. Each aspect of this conflict can only be understood through this lens. For instance, the Nakba happened in 1948 because Zionist leaders wanted more Jews and fewer non-Jews on the land. The victims of the Nakba were later denied our right-of-return because all of those 700,000 displaced Palestinians returning to what became the State of Israel would have meant more non-Jews than Jews.

When Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, it could have annexed those territories and included all of its local inhabitants in its population census and



offered them full citizenship with the right to vote. After all, Israel already had Israeli Arabs living inside the State of Israel, why not give every Palestinian from the West Bank and Gaza the right to become an 'Israeli Arab'. But that was not an option because there would have been too many non-Jews in a country that defines itself as a Jewish state.

So instead, Israel began building Jewish settlements in the West Bank and even in Gaza, and later dismantled the ones in Gaza when it withdrew in 2005. The question of demography lies at the centre of at every stage of this conflict.

While those who support the project of a Jewish state never miss an opportunity to remind the world how 'Palestine was never a country' and 'there is no such thing as Palestinians' and how 'Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East', it would be more honest to admit that the root cause is this unreasonable expectation that native-born Palestinians should have just passively surrendered our national rights in order to entertain the desire of an overseas-born Jewish diaspora to resettle itself on land inhabited by our grandparents and parents.

Even after three quarters of a century, they still have not achieved a Jewish demographic majority between the river and the sea. So instead of constantly blaming the victims, it is time the world realises what the root cause of the conflict is — demography. Only in addressing that root cause can we be in a position to conceptualise a solution that achieves both justice and lasting peace.

ACTIVITIES IN SOLIDARITY

Get to know the Palestinian Christian community in WA. For details justice@wa.uca.org.au

Re-read the stories in the World Day of Prayer 2024 booklet on Palestine.

Consider making a donation to help Palestinian refugees arriving in Australia (also see Uniting Church Assembly Standing Committee resolution, March 2024). Bank details are available on <https://palestinianchristians.org.au/accommodation-drive>

Join the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network <https://pien.org.au/>

FURTHER RESOURCES

Kairos Palestine <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/>

A Dossier on Israeli Apartheid: A Pressing Call to Churches Around the World.
Prepared by Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice 2022.

<https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/kp-a-dossier-on-israeli-apartheid-main.pdf>

A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians. October 20, 2023 <https://sabeel.org/a-call-for-repentance-an-open-letter-from-palestinian-christians-to-western-church-leaders-and-theologians/>

World Council of Churches

<https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-un-reform>

We Need an Exodus from Zionism by Naomi Klein April 24, 2024

<https://naomiklein.org/we-need-an-exodus-from-zionism/>

Presbyterian Church in the USA: Reflections from Bethlehem <https://pres-outlook.org/2024/10/between-anguish-and-resilience-reflections-from-bethlehem/>

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