

Living Stones: a retreat with Palestinian Christians

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We are told in the First Letter of Peter: 'Come to him, to that living stone rejected by men, but in God's sight chosen and precious, and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'

In 1984 Christians in the village of Ibillin, in Galilee, said to a British group of pilgrims that visitors to the Holy Land should not confine themselves to visiting the ancient shrines of past ages; they should also visit the 'living stones' of the Land. From this originated the setting-up of an ecumenical organization in Britain called 'Living Stones'.

Last year a group associated with this organization, but predominantly made up of Vincentians (namely, priests of the Congregation of the Mission, founded by St Vincent de Paul), decided to make 'a retreat through pilgrimage' in the Holy Land. It was my conviction that the Land, its peoples, and its history combine to provide an extraordinarily powerful context in which to 'make a retreat'. What would be unique about this one was that it would include meetings with indigenous Christians, living in the throes of the *intifada*.

Some idea of what that meant both for the group and for the Christians that the group met is best conveyed in the words of some of those Christians.

In Nazareth, Canon Riah abu El-Assal said:

There can be no Christian presence in the Land of the Holy One without the Christian community in the world. Therefore, wake up, Christians, before it is too late!

We lost some 30% of our people in 1948. Today we make up 2.3% of the population. We were quite influential. We were servants of the community, and we have, under God, done well. But the presence of Christians in the Land of the Holy One is really threatened, both in Jerusalem and

throughout the Land. There is an increase in those who emigrate for different purposes, and the number of those who are so disappointed and frustrated by what some Christians in the West say and preach about the State of Israel as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, that they leave.

He spoke about the 800,000 to 1 million visitors who came in a normal year, and most of whom were Christians:

They do not know that we exist. How can we be expected to believe that they pray for us? When they come here they are misled about what is going on in His Land. The so-called holy shrines mean very little to us Christians. What matters are the *living stones*, and hence your visit is very important, and is a source of strength to me and the Christian community. Many of the Christian visitors to Nazareth are not aware that there are Arab Christians. They believe that all Arabs are Moslems, and all Moslems are Arab. There are ten million Arab Christians in the Middle East. When the Christian visitors get off their buses and stay here 30 to 60 minutes at the most, I say to them, 'Wake up! Jesus stayed here 30 years, can't you stay here 30 minutes more?'

Canon Riah spoke about the need for a Christian *aliyah*, a 'return home' of the local Christians. In Jerusalem in 1967 there were about 21,000 Christians and now only 6,800, most of them old. But as Arab Palestinians they were not protected:

We have been sacrificed for many years on the altar that was inscribed with 'Mercy for the Jews'. I have the right to appeal to the consciences of the German people, not only to compensate us, but to atone for what has happened to us Arab Palestinians as a result of their treatment of the Jews. We are not in a position to pay for the sins of others.

He pointed out how, as Arab Palestinians, they had been discriminated against—especially by expropriation of land (more than 50% in Nazareth) and denial of educational opportunities, as well as numerous day-to-day restrictions. He mentioned that he himself was under a travel ban:

I have been accused of advocating armed struggle, which I did not, because I am a non-violent person. I strongly believe that violence breeds more violence, and bloodshed breeds bloodshed. The reason for my being banned is that they do not want the likes of you people to hear what I have to say. I have told the Minister of the Interior, 'I will not be restrained, even if I have to be crucified.'

I have a wish for the future that the two states of Israel and Palestine may become a federation of two states, with open borders. Then, we will become a blessing. So I believe.

The Jews have suffered, the Palestinians have suffered too. They have proved themselves to be hardworking, we too. They were prepared to die for their cause, so, too, the Palestinians. It is now time to challenge both to live for the same cause, the cause of peace, and the cause of justice.

Father Shaqour, of Ibillin, was quite as forthright:

The bad fact is that the victims of the concentration camps are now practising some of the same methods they experienced in Germany and elsewhere. We try to build bridges with Jews and others, provided that they acknowledge that we cannot accept any status than to be their equals.

He, too, spoke about how they had suffered from the confiscation of their best land, how their numbers had dwindled. But he had hope too:

We are living now in a very tense period of our Palestinian history, but very promising also. It's true that every day several martyrs are killed in the Occupied Territories during the *intifada*. You translate it very badly into English as 'uprising'. It is not 'up', and it is not 'rising'. It is an *intifada*. The word *intifada* is used in the Gospel by the Lord Jesus, when he says to you, 'If you go to a house, and you give them peace, and they don't accept that peace, go out, and before you leave, shake your feet so that no dust remains on your feet.' This is the *intifada*. It is 'shaking away the occupation'. It is not against the Jews, not against the army, not against Israel. No. It is saying to the Jews, 'We do not want you to be occupying us. We don't want to be your servants or slaves. We want to be at home in our own country.'

He said he hoped that the Churches 'will never dare to speak against one side, but for a solution for both sides, for justice for both sides.' But the Israelis had killed some very moderate Palestinian Christians and had jailed Mubarak Awad, the Chairman of the Centre for Non-violence and a devout Christian:

What do the Israelis refuse? The PLO? Moderate Palestinians? Non-violent Palestinians? Or simply the existence of the Palestinians?

In Jerusalem, the Latin Patriarch, Monsignor Michel Sabbah, also spoke of the difficulties of the moment, but there was a strong note of optimism in what he said as he contemplated the present distress. And that could even be said of a very different man, the Reverend Audeh Rantisi, the deposed Deputy Mayor of Ramallah, whom some of the group saw. Audeh can trace his ancestry to the building of the church of St George in Lydda in the fourth century; his ancestors were priests in that church. The story of his own sufferings as a refugee personalized the tragedy of the Palestinian people. But he said:

How can we bear the sufferings of Christ? It is by bearing the suffering of people, and striving for the right of God in the lives of human beings. That's what we are here for. We do pray. But prayer is not only kneeling.

He spoke about the brutal means used by the Israelis to suppress the *intifada*, and we asked him if he feared for his own life. He replied:

We are the servants of the Lord, standing for the rights of human beings, and the right of God in the lives of people.

Therefore, we do not fear.

He was asked if this meant that he was confident that in the long run they would win, and he answered: 'Christ said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," and Christ is with us, and we shall arrive.' But he was critical of Christians in Europe:

European Christians are quiet about what is going on here.

Because they won't dare speak out, on account of their guilty conscience. But I do believe that, if they keep quiet, they will suffer from a doubly guilty conscience. The British are responsible. If you want to pay for damage done, pay out of your own pocket. Don't have us pay.

Audeh stressed that he always differentiated between Judaism and Zionism. 'Zionism has deprived the Jewish people of their own spiritual inheritance,' he said. His closing words were:

It is time for Israel to think positively, and not depend on its muscle strength. Because already Israel has lost much morally. And I ask every nation that loves Israel to hasten to the situation, and help Israel out of this immoral situation, that true peace may come to this land. For from 1948 until now Israel has never had peace, because the peace of Israel depends upon the peace of the Palestinians. And I say, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' We have peace-keepers, and we have no peace to keep! We need people today honest with God and with themselves, who have guts and speak up for peace.

Last of all in Jerusalem we met Bishop Kafity, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. He said to us:

You have chosen to come to us during an uprising. An uprising is not a strange event in Jerusalem, or the Holy Land. Because the first uprising that shook the world took place in Jerusalem, the Resurrection. And this uprising is a kind of extension of the resurrection of the new life. It's not just a political protest by the people against an occupying force.

He believed it was not 'the throwing of stones, or petrol bombs, or tear gas bombs, or roadblocks' that was important about the uprising:

What I hope you will discover is the spirituality of the

uprising. There is a new spirituality among Moslems and Christians, one drawing them together. The other new element of the uprising is that it is forward-looking. For a long time the Palestinians have been backward-looking: 'Why am I a refugee? Why have they taken my house, etc?' We looked back at what happened to us, and we were mourning the situation. We were, so to speak, in the negative. The uprising has put us into the positive.

On Sunday the group went to the Arabic Mass in the Basilica in Bethlehem. It was very moving to hear the young people, many of them wearing crutches, sing their hymns.

And, finally, the group made its way to the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jala, just outside Bethlehem. The town was recovering from a curfew, declared to prevent a public demonstration at a Requiem Mass for a young Catholic shot by the soldiers. We prayed together with the seminarians, some from Nazareth, some from Madaba, and other villages on both banks of the Jordan. We sang hymns, they in Arabic, and we in English.

To visit the Holy Land at that time and in this way was a special privilege. The solidarity of the suffering Palestinians, on both sides of the Green Line, was astonishing. It would appear that the common experience of oppression is creating a nation. One young Palestinian intellectual put it this way: 'You might expect that the oppression would weaken us. On the contrary, we feel empowered.' But oppression and suffering cannot have that effect if that is all there is—oppression and suffering. In the words of Bishop Kafity:

The uprising is a new spirituality among the people of the Land, saying 'No' to all kinds of oppression. Not saying 'No' to a Jew because he is a Jew. This uprising is not racist. The people are saying 'No' to a structure in their own land which is not of their choice, and, like the Resurrection, they are trying to bring about a new life, a new hope.

Surely here was a message which we could carry into our own lives.