

Biblico-Theological Reflections:

PRAYING FOR PEACE IN PALESTINE-ISRAEL

John 14:1-6, 27

By

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INTRODUCTION:

Good afternoon to everyone!

Thank you very much, indeed, for this opportunity to come over and be part of this worldwide celebration of the World Week for Peace in Palestine-Israel initiated by the World Council of Churches and its network of mission partners!

I was asked to share with you this afternoon, my friends, some reflections on peace, especially peace in Palestine-Israel.

Just recently, Israeli naval commandos raided and terrorized hundreds of international peace activists aboard the *Mavi Marmara*, the flagship of Gaza Freedom Flotilla, a six vessel fleet carrying 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid to the blockaded Gaza Strip by the apartheid state of Israel. At least ten people were killed and dozens were injured. More than 480 foreign activists were seized from the raid and are now being held by the Israeli authorities in a prison in the Southern Israeli city of Beersheba. These people had no other intention than to deliver relief supplies to the besieged people of Gaza.

This recent violence in Gaza by Israeli soldiers, some would call it massacre, reminds me of my own experience sometime in 2002 when I joined a group of Americans, who conducted a study tour from Egypt to the Holy Land. It was called: ***The Exodus Experience***.

The study program, my friends, was organized by the Society of Biblical Studies based in Massachusetts, USA. It was meant for us to study the Bible, particularly the Exodus Event, right in the place where it happened. It's really different, my friends, if we would study the events recorded in the Scriptures right in the places where they happened. The Bible would become real and historically significant; it would become concrete and historical, rather than abstract and spiritual.

And so, we tried to trace the historical journey of the Israelites from Egypt, *the land of captivity*, to Canaan, *the land of promise*. We started our study tour in Cairo, Egypt, and ended up in Bethlehem. Of course, we also visited the towns and villages in Galilee, where Jesus had his ministry.

At that time, we still saw and felt from Egypt to the Holy Land the negative effects of the 9/11 bombings in the US in 2001. Tourism industry had collapsed. The town of Bethlehem was like a no-man's land. Commercial establishments closed down, except for some few small restaurants and grocery stores. Only a few hotels were opened. Alexander Hotel in Bethlehem, where we stayed for almost two weeks, was one of those still opened. It was owned by a Palestinian Christian named Joseph.

The entrance of the town of Bethlehem when we got there was heavily guarded, complete with barbed wires, check points, and heavily armed Israeli soldiers. Everyone must pass through the military check points upon entering and leaving the town. We had to present our passports and other travel documents every time we passed by the checkpoints, and the soldiers would scrutinize almost everything.

But I think our study program's hidden agenda was for us to be exposed to what was really happening in the Middle East, especially in the Holy Land, and to be enlightened and perhaps do something about it.

ELUSIVE PEACE

The issue of peace, my friends, has been with us for a long time. We have been searching all these years for a genuine and lasting peace in our land. But peace is not just a national aspiration; it is also a universal concern. People around the world have been crying for peace.

In our country, we, church people, have always been seeking for peace through prayers. As a matter of fact, not a few prayer rallies had been conducted, calling everyone to really pray for peace.

Some of those in government believe that peace may come to us by following the dictates of international financial institutions, like the IMF-World Bank. Thus, they insist that we have to pay our foreign debts despite the fact that our country is badly in need of financial resources.

Those in the military also believe that peace may come to us by observing the national security doctrine against those perceived to be threats to the status quo. They seem to believe that when all insurgents are gone, there will be peace in the land. Consequently, many have already sacrificed their lives in the name of peace. Many are languishing in jail, while others are simply forced to disappear, never to be seen again.

In Palestine-Israel, peace is difficult to achieve, because Israel, with the support of the US, refuse up to now to withdraw their troops from the occupied territories, despite the numerous resolutions issued by the United Nations. As a matter of fact, the US is spending more money for the citizens of Israel per capita than for its own citizens. Apparently, the US

government could not afford to say no to Israel due to the very strong Jewish lobby in the U.S. congress.

When our study group was in Jerusalem, we had the chance to meet with at least three different people representing three different points of views about the situation in Palestine-Israel. We met, first of all, with Rabbi Hagi, a professor of Hebrew Scriptures and a relative of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As a matter of fact, Rabbi Hagi was so proud to claim that he was Netanyahu's adviser, ideologue, and Bible teacher.

Rabbi Hagi represented the rightist Zionist fundamentalist position. According to him, there are only three options open for the Palestinians: either they would accept Israel's sovereignty, leave the country, or die in battle. This, my friends, is the kind of ideological position that gave birth to an apartheid state of Israel. This is the kind of ideology that is causing a lot of violence against innocent people in Palestine-Israel. By the way, Zionism is an ideological movement that works for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the land.

Rabbi Hagi firmly believed that the whole of Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River belong to Israel, and that the return of Israel to their homeland is a fulfillment of God's promise to Jacob. By the way, Rabbi Hagi lived in Bethel, where Jacob had his dream as well as God's promise for the Israelites had been given. Interestingly, many Christians today are also Zionists consciously or unconsciously, espousing Rabbi Hagi's position. And this is perhaps one of the reasons why there was very little condemnation from Christian churches around the world about what happened in Gaza.

Then, we also met with a group of women who called themselves *Bat Shalom*. Their leader, a Jewish woman named **Ruth**, who migrated from London, oriented us about how their program of reconciliation started. They were opting for an equal division of the land between the Jews and the Palestinians. They simply wanted a peaceful co-existence.

In the evening, we also had the chance to have conversations with **Julius**, a *tanzim* or guerrilla fighter. He was one of those who were inside the Church of Nativity when Israeli soldiers invaded Bethlehem in April 2002. (We had our study program in November 2002).

Bethlehem was supposed to be a Palestinian territory under the Oslo Agreement, but the Israelis wanted to take over the whole of West Bank even by force. About 150 tanks and 15,000 Israeli soldiers invaded the small town of Bethlehem in an Easter morning in April 2002.

Julius and his friends hid inside the church when Israeli soldiers started searching from house to house, arresting and killing people suspected as Palestinian militants. Julius and about 200 people were held hostage inside the Church of Nativity for 45 days. Julius was fortunate to be released, whereas some of his companions were arrested and imprisoned; others were exile, and still others were killed.

My friends, Julius believed that the only way to have peace in the holy land is to allow both side to talk and to have a peaceful co-existence. This I think was the picture of peace that Prophet Isaiah envisioned for Israel a long time ago, *“Wolves and lambs will eat together; lions will eat straw as cattle do”* (Isaiah 65:25). For as long as both camps claim to have exclusive ownership of the land, there would be no peace in the Holy Land.

PEACE IN JESUS’ TIME

For our reflections this afternoon, let me read to you a portion of John’s Gospel:

“Do not be worried and upset,” Jesus told them. “Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father’s house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am. You know the way that leads to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way to get there?”

Jesus answered him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me...Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I gave you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid”(John 14:1-6,27).

During Jesus’ time, people were also dreaming and desperately searching for genuine and lasting peace. The song the angels’ sung on Jesus’ birth carried with it the people’s longing for peace: *“Glory to God in the highest, Peace on earth and goodwill to all people”* (Luke 2:14).

As early as 64 BCE (Before the Common Era), Palestine-Israel was a Roman colony. Ceasar Augustus introduced *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) throughout the Roman Empire. *Pax Romana*, as we know, was a kind of peace based on military might. It was founded on the strength of the Roman army to crush any uprising or rebellion. It was a kind of peace maintained by fear and terror of the cross. Anyone caught destabilizing Roman Peace must be crucified. As a matter of fact, Jesus Christ our Lord himself was a victim of Roman Peace!

This, my friends, is the kind of peace that the world gives. It is a kind of peace with the scepter and pangs of death. Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem, because he knew how the people of the city – the religious and political leaders – collaborated in one way or another in establishing and maintaining *Pax Romana*.

Thus, Jesus cried saying: *“If only today you know the ways of peace! But your eyes are held from seeing. Yet, days will come upon you when your enemies will surround you with barricades, and shut you in and press on you from every side. And they will dash you to the ground and your children with you, and leave not a stone within you, for you did not recognize the time and the visitation of your God.”* (Luke 19:41-44).

These prophetic words of Jesus were somehow fulfilled when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70CE (Common Era) as a consequence of the Jewish Rebellion in Palestine that started in year 66. Hence, Jerusalem suffered the judgment of history, because the people didn't know the ways of peace. Indeed, my friends, genuine and lasting peace was also elusive in Jesus' time, as it is in our own time.

Hence, Jesus' message of peace is meant not only for the people of his day, but even for us today. It is a message for all people of all times, who are searching for a genuine and lasting peace. Jesus said: *"Peace is what I leave with you. It is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does"* (John 14:27).

WAYS OF PEACE

And so, what kind of peace Jesus was talking about? What are the ways of peace that people in Jerusalem failed to see? And perhaps even people of today also refuse to see?

In and through his life and death, Jesus Christ our Lord showed us the ways of peace. He said: *"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the father except by me"* (John 14:6).

The way of peace, therefore, is first of all the way of truth. Jesus said, *"I am the truth"*. Where there is truth, there is genuine and lasting peace.

One of the greatest gifts of the Jewish people to the world, which is indigenous to them, and without which Jesus may not be possible, is the prophetic. The prophetic, my friends, is no other than the courage and ability to know the truth, to proclaim the truth, and to stand up for the truth and defend it and even die for it. It is to *"let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry"* (Amos 5:24).

An old story was told about a sailor who was stranded in an island called *Island of Lies*. During his first day in that island, he was brought before a judge, because a woman, who got interested in his wealth, claimed that she was his wife and that this woman filed a complaint against the sailor for not supporting his family.

The sailor discovered later on that the island was called *Island of Lies* simply because people there live by telling lies. The sailor stayed in the island for several years until he was chosen to be the leader. One of the first things he did as a leader was to pass a law punishing anyone caught telling a lie. For the sailor firmly believed that no society founded on falsehood could ever last.

Today's Palestine-Israel should learn its lessons from the past. Ancient Judah fell into the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE, because of lies and deceit. Prophet Jeremiah said in his sermon in the Temple before the destruction of Judah, *"Look, you put trust in deceitful*

words. You steal, murder, commit adultery, tell lies under oath, offer sacrifices to Baal, and worship gods that you have not known before. You do these things I hate and then you come in my presence, in my own Temple and say, 'We are safe!' Do you think that my Temple is a hiding place for robbers? I have seen what you are doing.”(Jer. 7:8-11).

The government of GMA is now coming to an end. And perhaps, what the people in Baguio where I live would always remember was when she came over to the city in December 2003, and stood before the statue of Rizal our national hero, and made a solemn promise that she would make a supreme sacrifice like Rizal by not running for president so that our nation would not be divided. But then, she ran anyway and won, and so our country has been hopelessly divided ever since, under her administration.

The way to genuine and lasting peace is the way of truth. Therefore, to be instruments of God’s peace – to pray for peace, the peace that the world can not give – is to be bearers of truth, especially in a world like ours where the habits of misinformation and deception often pervade the flow of social relations.

Moreover, the way of peace is the way of life. Jesus said, “*I am the life*”. Where there is life, there is genuine and lasting peace.

Life, my friends, is a gift of God. It is that which God breathed in us that transformed us into a living soul (Genesis 2:7). Without life, we are mere dust from the ground. Life, therefore, is that which empowers us, and sustains us to do the will and the purpose of God for humanity. To destroy life, my friends, or even deny life to others is to go against God’s will and purpose for life.

Through his life and ministry, Jesus Christ our Lord showed us that life’s meaning and purpose is to share it especially to those who have less in life. Jesus said, “*Whoever tries to gain his own life will lose it; but whoever losses his life for my sake will gain it*” (Matthew 10:39).

My friends, peace remains elusive in our world today, because we have forgotten somehow life’s value and sanctity, life’s meaning and purpose. For as long as people are denied of life’s fullness, there will be no genuine and lasting peace in our world.

When our study group was in Bethlehem, we had a chance to interview an old Palestinian woman named Nadia Theodori. She shared with us some insights into what ordinary people were experiencing under the Israeli military occupation of Bethlehem. She was a volunteer worker at the YWCA in Jerusalem. Many times she had to struggle her way through the checkpoints in order to reach Jerusalem.

Nadia told us why children would throw stones at the tanks and Israeli soldiers, for which some had been shot to death by Israeli soldiers, simply because children would like to play freely in the streets. They could not just keep the children inside the house during the long curfew hours.

Nadia remembered so well how their house in Jerusalem was forcibly taken away by Israelis in 1948 when the League of Nations allowed Jews all over the world to return to their homeland. Nadia's house is still there in Jerusalem, but already occupied by Israelis. And this reminds me of Prophet Isaiah's vision of "new heavens and new earth," wherein the Israelites will build houses and live in them; it will not be used by others (cf. Isa. 65). But Nadia was optimistic that things would become better in the near future. Nadia believed that when people lost hope, they would lose everything.

Nadia personally didn't like the Palestinian suicide bombers, but she said people should understand that the suicide bombers were people who already lost hope. When they would explode the bomb, they would not actually be losing anything, because they have already lost everything. According to her, suicide bombing is a last resort of a desperate people. When asked about her suggestion, Nadia said that people from outside should come over and see for themselves what was really happening in the occupied territories.

Nadia added that what was really happening in the occupied territories was not a fight between Palestinians and Israelis, but rather a painful struggle between those who want peace and those who don't want peace all.

My friends, to be instruments of God's peace, to pray for peace, the peace that the world can not give – is to uphold life, to share life, especially to those who have less in life.

Finally, the way of peace is the way of justice. Jesus said, "*There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you*" (John 14:2). Where there is justice, where there are many rooms for everyone, there is genuine and lasting peace. There is peace in the Father's house, because there are many rooms for everyone.

My friends, if only our world today has room for everyone, perhaps there would be genuine and lasting peace. There is not enough room for everyone in our world today, because a few have too much, while many have too little or even nothing at all!

A contemporary story was told about a Chinese couple by the name of Zhang Hong and his wife Liu Xiaoying from the Zhejiang province of China. They were in their 60's and were living in a rundown former temple, because they could not afford a house of their own. But despite their poverty, the couples were raising nine children, only two of whom were theirs by birth. The rest were either given to them by unknown parents or found abandoned near their home.

One wonders: how could Zhang and Liu still found charity in their hearts when even finding food for them was a perennial problem? How could they raise nine children the youngest of whom was barely one year old? But then, that's the riddle of human nature. Suffice it to say that the couple seemed to find happiness in caring for these unwanted children.

The couple earned a living by scavenging. They walked the streets daily with a pushcart, sorting through the garbage and waste materials for discarded items that could be sold for recycling. In spite of all their hardships, the old couple never complained nor regretted their actions. When people asked them why they were doing this, they had only one answer: "How could we possibly have left the poor babies to die in the cold?"

But the story did not end in sadness. Life had become easier for the family due to a newspaper story that publicized the old couple's unselfish sacrifices. Many people from far and wide began to help them. And thus, the care and devotion of one elderly couple not only enabled a number of unfortunate children to live happy, normal lives, and to have rooms in this world, but also pricked the human conscience of a seemingly inhuman society.

Rabbi Jeremy in Jerusalem was one of the leaders of a group called Rabbis for Human Rights. One of the things they do is to prevent the displacement of Palestinians and the destruction of their olive plantations by Israeli authorities, and turning them into housing projects for Israelis. Rabbi Jeremy and his group use their own warm bodies, standing before the bulldozers, preventing them to destroy the plantations.

My friends, to be instrument of God's peace - to pray for peace, the peace that the world can not give – is to do justice; to do justice to the end that there will be enough room for everyone.

CHALLENGE OF PEACE

My friends, the challenge of realizing our dreams and visions of a world that is genuinely peaceful is far greater today than ever before, especially to us Christians, who claim and continue to proclaim that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace.

Let us always remember, however, that peace is not given on a silver platter. It has always its price in the struggle. Sometimes the cost of following the ways of peace is too much. We can be killed, harassed and imprisoned, like the foreign activists in Gaza, who were graciously and courageously delivering food to the blockaded people of Gaza, people who were desperately crying for food and freedom! But Jesus Christ our Lord said, "*Do not be worried and upset, do not be afraid*" (John 14:27).

And so, my friends, we press on toward the prize of peace in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who offered his very life for peace, and who is now calling us to build communities of peace in our own time and place, even as we continue to pray for world peace, especially for peace in Palestine-Israel, not only in this World Week for Peace, but until such time that genuine and lasting peace reign in Palestine-Israel. For we do believe, my friends, that Jesus Christ our Lord is indeed the way, the truth, and the life of a genuine and lasting peace. Amen.

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