



Palestine

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It would be reasonable to assume that this year's World Day of Prayer theme 'Palestine' was born out of the post October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the ensuing Israeli invasion of Gaza, and the daily genocidal terrorism, mass starvation, destruction and displacement now faced by the civilian Gazan population. However, that is not the case.

Today's World Day of Prayer service has been several years in the making. Developed by a group of Palestinian Christian women - its writing and production was completed long before the events of October 7 and the current war in Gaza.

The only post October 7 element you will find in the service booklet is an additional prayer, recently released, which has been printed on the back page of the booklet.

That it is easy to assume the stories and prayers of this service grew out of the current war in Gaza is significant in itself - for it speaks to us of cause and effect.

Nothing, in what I am about to say, is in any way a justification of the Hamas terrorist attack and its barbarous evil – rather it is about helping us understand its cause - for the Hamas attack on Israel did not occur in a vacuum – it has a context, a history, a story of an occupied, persecuted and terrorized Palestinian people that has spanned more than seventy years. Born of the Western powers colluding with Zionism to carve up Palestine and dispossess its people to create the State of Israel.

The stories we have heard today, from Eleonor, Lina and Sara, immerse us in that context of decades of occupation, dispossession and violence.

Eleonor's family forced from their home and land. Look at the maps on page 6 - look at the diminishing land of Palestine – this is the context of utter despair that pushes a lost generation to violent protest, revolt and hopelessness.

Lina's aunt murdered, like so many journalists speaking truth to power.

Sara's grandparents, forced to flee and, like the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, becoming refugees in a neighbouring country. When violently driven from their home by Israeli soldiers, Sara's grandparents took with them the key to their home in the hope of one day being able to return. That is a story in itself.

Have a look at the picture on page 5. It's a photo I took many years ago when I first visited the Aida Refugee camp in Bethlehem. This Palestinian refugee camp still houses Palestinian families dispossessed and forced from their homes, farms and villages by the Israeli army in 1948.

In the photo you can see the giant *Key of Return* placed over the entry gate to the camp. It is a defiant and poignant reminder to Israel that during the holocaust, when the Nazis forced Jewish families from their homes and sent them off to now infamous concentration camps, they took with them the key to their homes in the hope of one day returning. Now it is the Palestinians hoping for the right to return – holding and treasuring the key to their homes – now occupied by illegal Jewish settlers. The *Key of Return* is a provocative symbol of irony and acts to expand awareness about the plight of Palestinian refugees, serving as a continual reminder of their right to return home, a right that is at once political, lawful, just and humane.

So, where do we find hope in all of this? It's hard – and the closer your connection to the Holy Land the harder it is. So many things conspire to kill hope – so many things conspire to keep us ignorant – so many things conspire to keep us silent.

Criticise the occupation of Palestine, the policies of the Israeli government, the illegal and terrorist activities of Israeli settlers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and you are branded anti-Semitic. You are silenced.

Back in the 1980s, when I first developed a relationship with the Anglican Dean of St. George's College in East Jerusalem, I discovered that the practice of the Western media was to photoshop Catholic bishops, who were members of President Arafat's PLO Executive Council out of all pictures of the Council before they were released in the media. The Western powers did not want the presence of Christian leaders lending respectability to the Palestinian cause. Better we all believe they were all Muslim terrorists. You are kept in ignorance.

Even today, try to organise a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and get your travel agent to use the word 'Palestine' in your itinerary or in any of their advertising blurb. No. Despite the fact that Bethlehem, and many of the holy sites are not within the State of Israel but are in the Palestinian Territories they will not use the word 'Palestine'. At least, not until you tell them you will find another travel agent.

And try to organise a pilgrimage where you actually visit and worship with local Palestinian Christian communities. No! They would much prefer you to celebrate private Masses or private prayer services locked within the ghetto of your own pilgrimage group. It's as though the only Church that exists in the Holy Land is the *Tourist Church* – the local indigenous Palestinian Church remains undiscovered and untouched by most pilgrim groups.

Is it any wonder Palestinian Christians believe they have been forgotten and betrayed by the rest of the Christian world. Is it any wonder Palestinian Christians believe they have been forced into silence.

Palestinian Christians have a devastating saying about Western Christian pilgrims: *"You come here to the Holy Land and visit and venerate dead stones - and you forget the living stones, Palestinian Christians who have kept the faith through wars, persecution and oppression since the time of the Apostles – we are the Living Church in the Holy Land."*

But there is hope.

All my Jewish friends are just as critical, or more so, of the current Israeli government as I am. And many of them work and pray together with Palestinian Christians and Muslims for a just solution to the seventy-year-old Israel / Palestine conflict.

One remarkable organization of hope is called the Parents Circle - Families Forum (founded by a Jewish father and a Palestinian father, who both lost children to terrorists. This grassroots initiative brings together Palestinian and Israeli families who have suffered the unimaginable loss of immediate family members due to the ongoing conflict. Their shared grief has become a powerful catalyst for reconciliation, peace and hope.

Another is Bethlehem University. It's work in nurturing and forming Palestinian Christians and Muslims as future leaders and role models is well known to many of you here today.

The stories we have heard from Eleonor, Lina and Sara are full of hope. A commitment of Christ's command to love, the prophetic courage of truth telling, the resilience of so many in the face of injustice and violence.

For their sake, do not be ignorant, do not be silent, give them a voice – strengthen their hope!

For without hope, and without justice, we will continue to hear that ancient plea of the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice is heard in Ramah, sobbing and loudly lamenting; it was Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they were no more."

Three Stories from Palestinian Women

My name is Eleonor.

I am a Palestinian Christian – a member of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land. I come from a deeply rooted old Jerusalem family. My skin is wrinkled like the trunk of an olive tree. Like the olive trees, I have witnessed wars and violence.

In the early 19th century, my great grandfather established St. George's Orthodox Church, which enabled Christians living outside the city walls to have a place to worship.

That church remained in existence until the Catastrophe, or Nakba, of 1948, when 750,00 Palestinians were forced to flee, disperse and become refugees. My family included. Due to heavy shelling and bombardment, my parents ran for their lives.

They took shelter at my mother's cousin's home, hoping to return soon to their original home and St. George's Church. That never happened. Today, my parents' home and St George's Church have become Confederation House, an Israeli cultural centre.

Prior to fleeing, my parents' Jewish neighbours offered to store the treasures of the church, including icons and precious communion cups. They promised to safeguard my parents' property and belongings until the family's return.

As my brothers and I were growing up, my parents remembered their neighbours graciously as they waited for the big day of return. They imagined themselves collecting these sacred items and thanking these neighbours for keeping their promise. Sadly, my parents have passed away without realizing this dream. And yet, I vividly remember that, despite their pain and suffering over all they had lost, my parents were always thankful and spoke kindly about these Jewish neighbours. My parents taught me how to bear with others in love, always remembering to be grateful for those who do good.

As I have gone through life as a Palestinian Christian, I have chosen to be fully engaged with all members of the community at local and global levels. I learned from my parents' example how important it is to stay together with others, even when life is harsh and difficult. I have designed and implemented humanitarian aid and development programs, as well as social and community projects. These served all people, regardless of religion or ethnicity, gender, status or need. I could have left the country of my roots, but I made the choice to stay and live out Jesus' commandment to



My name is Lina.

On May 11, 2022, I lost my Aunt Shireen, a famous journalist who was killed in Jenin. For me, Aunt Shireen was like the branch of an olive tree, resisting the strong winds that threatened to erase the truth of Palestinian experience.

When Aunt Shireen died, Palestine lost an icon, a legend, and a famous Al Jazeera journalist.

And yet, Shireen was more; she was also my aunt, my godmother at baptism and my best friend. Shireen had been my role model for as long as I can remember.

She was also a role model to many young Palestinian women. For 25 years, Aunt Shireen dedicated her life to telling the stories of Palestinian experience, and to being the voice of truth. She entered every house in Palestine and the Arab world through the TV screen.

Many people did not know that my aunt was a Palestinian Christian. Shireen's faith led her to bear with all in love, despite differences in faith traditions. She stood with all who were being harmed. She struggled for both Muslims and Christians to have access to the holy sites in Jerusalem. Her truth telling was also a way of bearing with the occupiers in love.



Shireen Abu Akleh

My name is Sara.

Sometimes I feel like the leaf on an old olive tree, connected down to the roots. I was born and raised in Jerusalem as a Lutheran Christian. Life as a Palestinian woman surely has been, and still is challenging.

My grandparents used to live in Jaffa. They grew up there before 1948, living alongside other Christians, Muslims and Jews. When the state of Israel was created in 1948, the Israeli forces came to my grandparents' home and forced them to leave. My grandparents became refugees in Jordan.

Many years later, my grandparents came for a visit to Jerusalem and my parents took me on a trip to Jaffa. They were excited to show me the home they used to live in. Everything had changed except for the trees, which helped us to identify the place. Sadly, the people currently living in the house were hostile towards us. I was quite young, but I do remember them shouting. My grandpa was trying to explain to them that this used to be his house. However they refused to hear any part of it and chased us away.



The Key of Return at entrance to Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem

Later in time, when I visited my grandparents in Jordan, my grandma showed me the door keys that her mum had kept when leaving their house. She kept the keys with the hope that one day they would be able to return to their home. Sadly, this is the case for many. Even today, people are still being put out of their homes. Many have kept their keys with the hope of returning, a hope that is passed on through the generations. I know that the tree from where I came is strong and resilient. I can bear with others in love. My grandparents showed me the way.

Background Information about Palestine

Country Background

This region for over 3000 years has been significant to three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

It has had many names, depending on the many tribes that have settled at different times in the land. The land has been nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations and structures because of its strategic position as a crossroad to three continents: Asia, Africa and Europe.

History

The region has witnessed the invasion of various powers throughout its history, including the Assyrians (8th century BCE), Babylonians (c. 601 BCE), Persians (539 BCE), Greeks (330s BCE), and Romans (63 BCE).

In 70 CE, the Second Jewish Temple was destroyed by the Roman Empire. During the 4th century, the Roman emperor Constantine followed his mother's conversion, making Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire. In the 7th century, Muslim rulers conquered Palestine, followed by the Crusaders, the Egyptians and the Mongols. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire invaded and ruled the region until the end of World War I.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 gave British consent for a national home for Jews in Palestine, with the rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine should be respected.

In 1918, the Ottoman Empire was defeated, and the Middle East was divided between the British and the French. The British ruled over Palestine from 1923-1948, with many European Christians supported Jewish people immigrating to the "promised land." The British gave land they did not own to a people who had no land, claiming that Palestine was a barren land without people living there. However, Palestine was a rich agricultural region, already the land of "milk and honey," and a diverse set of tribes were already living there.

Support for the creation of a homeland for the Jews increased after the end of World War II, largely because of the Holocaust. The UN 1947 Resolution 181, called for 2 independent states (Palestine and Israel), and international status for the city of Jerusalem. But no sovereign Palestinian state exists.

May 15, 1948, the State of Israel was created. Between 1947 and 1949, 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes.

In June 1967, Israel launched the Six-Day War, seizing Sinai and the Golan Heights, and occupying East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.



In 1988, Palestine proclaimed its independence only on the land Israel had occupied since 1967. For the sake of peace, Palestinians agreed to live on only 22% of their original land.

Gaza:

The Gaza Strip of 365 square kilometres borders Egypt and Israel. With 2 million inhabitants, 47 % being children, it is the 3rd most densely populated area in the world.

In 2005, Israel dismantled their settlements in Gaza and withdrew their military, but continued to control almost all land border crossings, as well as Gaza's sea and air space.

Israel has waged 4 military assaults against Gaza since 2008-9.

There are less than one thousand Christians in Gaza.

The West Bank:

In 1967, when Israel occupied the Palestinian territories, Western powers called the region the West Bank, because it was on the west bank of the Jordan River. In the mid90s

the West Bank was divided into Areas A, B and C. But Israel maintains control over air, land, borders, and the economy.

In order to travel between any of the areas in the West Bank, Palestinians must go through checkpoints. These checkpoints make life incredibly difficult for Palestinians to reach school, work, religious sites, medical appointments, or to visit family.

There are approximately 250 illegal Israeli settlements, with approximately 700,000 Jewish settlers, mostly in Area C. A third of the settlements are in East Jerusalem.



Population

There are over 5 million Palestinians living today in Palestine and Israel. 2% of these Palestinians are Christian, among a majority of Palestinian Muslims.



Christianity

Jerusalem is the seat of 13 historically recognized churches. 75% of Palestinian Christians are from the Greek Orthodox Church.

Christians in Palestine have worked to develop an ecumenical spirit, with a Jerusalem Interchurch Office as a joint project of the churches in Jerusalem, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC).

Arts and Culture

Arts and culture are crucial for keeping people's spirits strong and vibrant. Creativity shows that no matter how desperate you are, you can still dance, paint, write, and make music. The arts help people continue living with hope. Arts and culture also keep Palestinian heritage and memory alive. Poetry, visual art, embroidery, dabkeh (traditional folklore dancing), theatre and cinema portray Palestinian life. This affirms that what Palestinians are experiencing is real, whether it is joy or pain.



Agriculture

Palestinians have tilled, sowed, planted and harvested in the land of milk and honey. They have worked both large and small plots of earth, including gardens and orchards. Herbs, spices, fruits and greens help to feed family and friends.

Palestinian women make up a majority of those doing agriculture. Under the Israeli occupation, many farmers have been denied access to their fields, and olive trees have been uprooted. Olives and olive oil have been used throughout the region for medicinal purposes, healthy cooking, and to bless the foreheads of people.



The cactus has become an inseparable element of Palestine. Natural hedges and fences were planted to mark houses and neighbourhoods. Even after the 1948 destruction of over 400 villages, the cactus lived on to witness the plight of its inhabitants. This cactus, called the “prickly pear” bears delicious fruit.

In some regions of Palestine, one can also find trees bearing almonds, avocados, chestnuts, and citrus fruits, like oranges, grapefruit and pomelos.

The Role of Women

There is a perception/belief around the world that women in the Middle East region are passive, silent, and non-influential. However, both historically and in modern times they are active in tilling the land. With many men killed Palestinian women become sole providers, protecting their children and homes. Many Palestinian women have become prominent figures in society.

Education

95.4% of children are enrolled in basic education. There are three different systems of education for Palestinians: Israeli, Palestinian, and United Nations Refugee schools in the 19 Palestinian refugee camps. Traditionally most schools have separated boys and girls.



Health

Hospitals in Palestine are well equipped with professional doctors and nurses, but the Palestinian health care system suffers from a lack of financial support for administration and running costs. Restrictions on movement make it difficult for Palestinians to access health care.

Water



Water is the most crucial issue in Palestine. The most important aquifers are in the West Bank in area C, which is controlled by Israel. Palestinians have to buy water from Israel! The illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem use four times more water for swimming pools and luxury irrigation.

Signs of Hope

Despite all the suffering and injustice, Palestinians have maintained their steadfastness through mostly nonviolent resistance. There is a genuine effort among Palestinian Christians, Muslims, and some Jews, who believe in equal rights, and who advocate and work for justice. This collaboration involves a witness grounded in each faith tradition, but it also involves a deeper belonging to the land and culture.

