

The 9th Jerusalem International Conference

Jerusalem is the capital of the eternal State of Palestine;

Fidelity of Religion and Fidelity of History

In the period 12-14 April 2018

Ahmed Al-Shukairy Hall Ramallah - Palestine

A Perspective on Peace-making from a disciple of Jesus: the necessity of ending reciprocal violence for the sake of all God's children.

Ramallah and Jerusalem Conference April 2018

Bishop Philip Huggins, President, National Council of Churches in Australia.

Thank you for your kind invitation to this important Conference.

In coming here, along with others from far-away Australia, I was graciously assisted by Ambassador Izzat Abdulhadi, of the General Delegation of Palestine in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, along with First Secretary Ms Noura Saleh, whose family I hope to meet here in Ramallah.

It is several years since I was in Ramallah. I remember the city's vitality and the warmth of the people.

Since that visit, as before, along with many, I continue to pray for your peace with justice.

This Conference obviously has a political context. From the program, it is clear many speakers will offer their perspective on the political context, especially after President Trump's recent statements.

But my calling and vocation is to the life of the spirit - religious leadership.

What I can offer comes from this vocation, including from many years of inter-religious co-operation. I am the Past President of the Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia (JCMA). I have sought to support both the Muslim and the Jewish communities in their various times of difficulty. I am grateful for deep friendships resulting from our work together for the common good.

What I have to offer may be a little unexpected, but I hope it is helpful.

I would like to talk about children.

When I was a child, I would imagine a world without war and other violence.

It seemed so obvious.

My father had been at World War II, not long before.

He was so upset.

Later I would have other words for what happens when a young man leaves the family farm in Australia and ends up under falling bombs on the Greek Island of Crete.

He was evacuated to Palestine and always grateful for the kindness of you Palestinian people. I have a Prayer Book he sent from here, back to his father on the family farm near the Mallee in 1943.

1943! I remember my father, his courage and war-trauma, coming here today. Yes, to a place of much courage and further war-trauma.

When I became a parent, we also lived on a little farm. We wanted to give our children space, clean air, peace, good food. We grew vegetables. I milked a cow. Our olive trees were slow growing.

One night when I prayed over our sleeping first-born, I had an Epiphany moment.

The media was full of war, threats of war, just as had been the case when I was a little boy. Now it was the language of nuclear war.

My Epiphany moment was quite simple.

I couldn't be a good parent just by these domestic activities, albeit soaked in prayer.

I had to engage the place where private and public meet in advocacy, policy, resource allocation and in politics.

So the years have gone by with this emphasis on peace-making, hoping all children will have peaceful lives.

I have done many things but the same simple dream remains: of one human family on a tiny planet in a vast universe, all wanting peace for their children and finding this peace together.

That peace, which is a divine gift and intention, then encompasses our whole being and is also just, fair and generous.

Now we have grandchildren and I am much older. I have learned, slowly, to see the world more and more through the eyes of children as I personally look across the valley into eternity.

Like St John when he was quite old and had had much time to ponder what he had seen in Jesus, I say *'let us love one another for love is of*

God and those who live in love, live in God, and God lives in them”. (1 John 4:16)

So I am no further advanced than I was as a child, except that I know better how complex this peace-making is, given historical context.

Notwithstanding the difficulties produced by history’s failures, what is also obvious is that we *have* to end the patterns of reciprocal violence.

In my view, this is the primary purpose of religion today.

Religions have provided many of the justifications for reciprocal violence and still do today.

Religions must now reach common purpose in bringing this to an end.

This common purpose is given to us by the innocence in our children and grandchildren’s faces, is it not?

It is also given by the reality of the contemporary arms race. For example, political leaders have their fingers near buttons that can release new nuclear weapons multiple times more powerful than those which destroyed Hiroshima’s people, that summer morning around breakfast time.

These are leaders who have barely met, if ever.

The most basic learnings of humankind about building healthy relationships and about reconciling broken relationships, are set aside as the politics of fear, hatred and greed put us all at risk.

We might all be killed by a mistaken or misconstrued tweet.

Can the children of Abraham and Sarah be the leaders in ending reciprocal violence, making peace in the family of nations?

It seems most unlikely, just as did the Creator's original promises to our forebears in faith!

What might help us make a new beginning on this journey of faith?

Let me make these three suggestions:

1. We need a sober recognition of humankind's learnings about reconciliation. Here is a summary of some learnings:

- The process of reconciliation, of healing and wholeness, is always complex, but somebody has to take the initiative!

Preferably the one most aggrieved, as an act of grace, takes the initiative.

My model is the Risen Jesus' three-fold initiative with Peter who had betrayed him, in John 21. Jesus gives Peter space, then initiates reconciliation and then creates a future pathway of common purpose.

- Claims of superiority and supremacy based on religion can cause great harm.

Extremists of different religions are currently threatening minorities in a whole range of countries, as you well know. A Melbourne Priest recently went to an Anglican Interreligious meeting in Cairo. Everywhere he was guarded by soldiers with machine guns. Originally from Sri Lanka, he returned via the wedding of a school friend's daughter in a Kandy Mosque. The Mosque was attacked by religious extremists. Listening was another Melbourne Priest originally from India. He had just returned and recounted stories of rising religious extremists in India.

When religions cease to be a faith-journey, open to one another and God, they become an ideology. Trouble follows.

‘God is on our side’ language often is then a gloss for a pursuit of power and control. Especially as regards State Religions.

Imperialist Christinity has been complicit in this abuse as well.

- We are all responsible for reconciliation.

Reconciliation is about a process that includes:

Listening carefully; living with kind actions, and imagining a future that is different together. Healthy relationships are the key. My wife is a psychologist. I live with my therapist!

She says, as do others: *“Very few people feel well-listened to by anyone.”*

Interrupted conversations seldom end well. Patience and a generosity of spirit is needed.

- History matters.

We cannot avoid the wounds of our history, nor do we want to betray those who have made sacrifices in the past. But a history of division just can’t continue. In March, as above, fuelled by hate speech on social media, there was that mob violence in Kandy Sri Lanka. The previous history has not yet been reconciled and so it only took a few lies and rants on social media for mobs to go crazy.

- Peace can offend.

Why? Because some people will always remember the pain of past wounds and actively not want a new day. People can become so accustomed to a current identity that they can't let a new day dawn. Their identity becomes habituated to 'Us' versus 'Them'. The narrative of their life can be challenged by the possibilities of peace.

Yet, somehow we have to keep creating opportunities, keep forgiving, keep absorbing the pain and not pass it on. That is what I see in Jesus on the Cross. The Way of the Cross, through to new life; trusting in Resurrection energy. The humility of the Crucified God is not the end. Always there is a redemptive narrative in the divine love, for each person, for all of us together.

Can this Conference create a redemptive narrative out of the current crisis? Can we do this together?

- Reconciliation is elusive

It will always seem temporary and fragile. The only way to sustain a reconciling new beginning is through creative effort, attentive and grace-filled, taking every opportunity to deepen relationships and create friendships.

2. The careful, intentional cultivation of friendship across the religions and cultures.

Australia is a fortunate nation and has become home to many refugees fleeing violence.

This includes Jews after the cruelty of the Nazis and the Holocaust; Muslims and Christians from many places, including Palestine.

It is possible and relatively simple to cultivate friendships amongst us all. All it takes is, grounded in one's own faith, to be open to what one can learn from the other. This is receptive inter-religious dialogue. It goes beyond telling the other about my faith and clarifying our differences. Rather, one seeks to receive from the other what might assist, in my case, a better discipleship of Jesus. I have learned much from friends who are Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs.

The cultivation of friendship means being open so that common initiatives in peace-making can emerge. As relationships deepen they provide a reservoir of good-will to manage crisis moments when they emerge, as they do.

The poets say "each friend is a world". That is, of meals shared, gifts offered, stories of each other's families with all our hopes and dreams.

We are all made of many such worlds.

I once listened to a Cardinal respond when he was asked as to why he travelled so much and how he handled it. His work was to create new beginnings where there were barriers. He said he travelled because it is necessary to go to where people are for the cultivation of friendship.

This is true, yes? It is certainly my motivation in coming here for this Conference. No doubt it is yours as well.

There's nothing like shared meals and informal conversations together as we try to make our world a little kinder and calmer. The more we understand about one another, the more readily grace can abound.

Yes?

3. Prayer and meditation.

In our country recently we have noticed a new phenomenon. There are individuals being drawn to more solitary lives in order to pray deeply for peace in the world.

We see other historic eras when there has been this phenomenon in times of crisis including the 3rd and 4th Centuries' emergence of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, stretching from Syria to the Sudan. Saint Anthony of Egypt is seen as the inspiration and founder, in Holy Spirit. He sought to live with a pure heart, praying to see God.

To live with a pure heart, without malice, is itself a long journey as we all know. It involves sustained spiritual practice and discipline.

This interior journey toward holiness of being is crucial to the ending of reciprocal violence. Our hearts do not lie. If our immediate reaction - if the movement of our heart - upon hearing of some sadness is an ideological one rather than a human one, then our heart has been corrupted. We should go straight away on pilgrimage, until our heart is cleansed. This is our shared spiritual wisdom about pilgrimage

The truth is, as a United Nations' declaration says "wars begin in human minds". We become what we think. Therefore we have to attend to what we think. It shapes what we say and do. The pattern then shapes character and destiny. If our thinking is endlessly full of enmity, what will ever change? This fact is amplified in the new world

of social media. Hate speech and cruel comments cause bullied young people in our country to suicide; they cause nations to explode.

In Melbourne around UN Peace Day, leaders of all the different faith traditions meet near dawn for silent meditation and prayer together.

We can do more of this, as religious leaders. We need to do more of this together, particularly emphasising how our spiritual practice helps us to live with a pure heart, free of enmity or any desire for revenge.

Imagine if all the Rabbis, Imams and Bishops of Israel and Palestine were to meditate and pray silently together, somewhere neutral that is safe for all? Imagine that!

What a witness that would be to the compassion and yearning for peace that is the deepest truth of each tradition!

What a sign of hope this would be to a world full of tears!

Our youngest grandchild was born last year on St Francis of Assisi's Feast Day. When I look at her I pray, with St Francis: *"Make me a channel, an instrument of your peace"*.

Conclusion

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring love.

Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.

Where there is discord, let me bring union.

Where there is error, let me bring truth.

Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.

Where there is despair, let me bring hope.

Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.

Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

O Master, let me not seek as much

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love,

for it is in giving that one receives,

it is in self-forgetting that one finds,

it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,

it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

Dear friends, many of you will have been to the grave of Abraham and Sarah in Hebron. It was a tesne place when I visited. A sad place.

Can a better day come? I pray so.

For now, please accept these few reflections of mine, forgiving any error or unintended offence.

I have much to learn from you all and look forward to listening to you.

I hope together we can build peace, as we look at the world through the eyes of our children and grandchildren, "God's little people".

Amen.