

# ADVENT 2018



*An Advent guide with reflections on Palestine/Israel*

## Introduction to the Advent reflections

These reflections are based on lectionary readings from Luke's Gospel (Year C), with stories and photos from the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), a program of the World Council of Churches (WCC) – [www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)

Christmas is a festival of great joy! "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" announced the angel to the shepherds!

The Advent readings from Luke and the birth narratives (Luke 1-2) take us on a journey that invites us to find joy in the midst of struggles, pain and suffering.

*'We need to celebrate because celebration is a kind of steadfastness. There is a message of defiance through celebration' (Fr Jamal Khader, Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem).*

Each biblical reading is supported by a reflection, and stories and photos from the experience of Australian EAPPI participants about life today in Israel and Palestine. We encourage you to use these prayers and reflections for your own Advent journey, and to share in worship and in other settings.

## Introduction to the work of EAPPI

Imagine your home, containing all your possessions, was demolished without warning. Your children were so scared of the intimidation they get on the way to school that they wet the bed at night. Or that you weren't allowed to cross a checkpoint on your way to work, meaning no income to support your struggling family.

Settlements. Home demolitions. Restriction of movement. Violent harassment. These are just some of the injustices faced on a daily basis by Palestinian families living under Israel's military occupation. It's destroying people's lives and livelihoods. And it's fueling conflict in the region. As Martin Luther King Jr said: *"There can be no justice without peace and there can be no peace without justice."*

Appalled by the pain and injustice they were witnessing in their communities, local church leaders came together to take action. Their vision was a just peace, where all people in Palestine and Israel could live with freedom, dignity and security based on international law and human rights. Local church leaders in the Holy Land called on the World Council of Churches to support the communities affected by conflict on the ground, and WCC responded by establishing the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). EAPPI deploys volunteers for three month placements living alongside vulnerable communities. The volunteers bear witness to their suffering; keep watch with their communities; and work alongside an international Christian network standing in solidarity with people of all faiths, building the foundations for justice and peace in Palestine and Israel.

To find out more about the role of an Ecumenical Accompanier (EA) visit [www.eappi.org](http://www.eappi.org)

*This resource is a joint project of members from the EAPPI Australian Committee and the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN) [www.pien.org.au](http://www.pien.org.au). This is not an official EAPPI document. Opinions expressed herein represent the opinions of the individuals involved and do not necessarily represent the views of the EAPPI program or World Council of Churches.*

*PIEN is a network of Australian Christians who are seeking a lasting peace in Palestine and Israel. They work closely with the National Council of Churches and the EAPPI program as well as with the heads of churches in Jerusalem.*

## Week 1: Luke 21:25-36

*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

*Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”*

The writer speaks in the historical context of the destruction of the Temple in 70CE, the experience of living under Roman occupation, and the ongoing unrest, uncertainty, and persecution for the followers of Jesus in both the religious and political realms. It included the genocide of innocent children. This passage is a recognition of living in the midst of an apocalypse with waves of impending doom. The realm of nature is a visible symbol and sign of the difficulties. The "roaring of sea and waves" is seen as a prelude to the unleashing of primordial chaos, where what had once been ordered now unravels as it is subjected to unpredictable forces.

In the midst of the particular challenges and clouds of disaster on the horizon, the writer speaks of the imperative for people to stay alert: “Stand up and raise your heads! Look at the fig tree! Be on your guard! Be alert!” The writer warns those who are otherwise preoccupied and distracted that they need to heed the warning signs with a desperate urgency (*deomaí*): ‘Beg’ for the ability to stand, capacity to endure and strength to escape. It is also a warning for those of us in the present day, when we also find ourselves distracted and busy with other matters.

The experience of Palestinian people living in Gaza and the West Bank resonates with the experience of impending chaos, disorder, turmoil and confusion as described by the writer of Luke’s Gospel. There is no sense of long term security and certainty. Houses may be bulldozed without notice. Children are often taken in the darkness of night by the authorities. Olive and almond trees and orchards are uprooted and discarded. In spite of this relentless provocation, violence and destruction, Palestinians have a word - *sumud* - that captures a steadfast refusal to be provoked or demoralized. It describes a patient determination to stay on their own land and to carry on in spite of all the difficulties of living under military occupation.

*“My faith has affected my ability to hope. I was born and raised in Bethlehem, and I always carry that inside of me.”* (Vera Baboun, a devout Catholic and former Mayor of Bethlehem).

2018 marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which should guide the search for an enduring solution for Israel and Palestine. ‘Instead, the lives of generations of Palestinians and Israelis have been defined and confined by a conflict that has shaped their physical and human landscape under a heavy atmosphere of fear, mutual distrust and despair. Unacceptable violence and incitement exacerbated mistrust and militant activity and the absence of Palestinian unity also constituted obstacles to a negotiated solution. The Secretary-General stressed that “the United Nations will continue to support Israelis and Palestinians on the road to peace by helping them to take the historic steps to achieve two States living side by side in peace, within secure and recognized borders and with Jerusalem as the capital of both.” ’

*(quoted from United Nations Forum on the question of Palestine 70 years after 1948 - Lessons to achieve a sustainable peace, 17th - 18th May 2018, United Nations Headquarters, New York).*

## THE BEST OF HUMANITY IN THE WORST OF CIRCUMSTANCES

When a young Mum's arms began to tremble from exhaustion an unknown man standing shortly before the first set of turnstiles began to gesture emphatically. He was encouraging her to send the infant she was holding - to him. She'd been lifting the child up out of the crush of people waiting to be processed at Qalandia checkpoint.

Qalandia Checkpoint is elaborate and impersonal by virtue of its design. It includes a large initial queuing space (standing only); three separate sets of industrial type turnstiles, interspersed between waiting or holding bays, the first resembling a large cage and the latter where a security clearance is actually issued or denied; and no opportunity for human interaction between enforcing agents (soldiers and private security personnel) and civilians. It better resembles the interior of a poorly regulated abattoir than a processing centre built for the primary purpose of checking security.

When the checkpoint is full, as it often is, the approach to permit control becomes increasingly pressurized and unstable until you reach the caged area. Then people are forced to shuffle through in controlled single files, distinguished by tunnels constructed from steel bars and shadowed by the razor wire strung liberally overhead.

Amidst the stench of overflowing lavatories, so offensive that they've become redundant, and contending with waiting times that frequently pass the 1-hour mark (on a good day), injuries at Qalandia are common. Parents avoid exposing their children to this checkpoint in particular, and only do so when left without alternative entry options to the unequally shared city of Jerusalem, which is a cultural and economic heartland for both Palestinians and Israelis.



This checkpoint is certainly not a place for someone as little as the child in this picture. If the crowd convulsed ill-fatedly, or if the Mother's arms gave way under the strain, the baby was at risk of serious injury and at a plausible worst, of suffocating or being trampled to death. So, this Mum gave her over to the mass of accommodating strangers, apparently agreeing that the best option was to trust the crowd to deliver her baby to relative safety. After many hands and several metres the baby reached the stranger and he rocked her out of frantic distress as best he could.

Several minutes on and the turnstiles began to move again. This man carried the baby through the clunky, hostile machinery and patiently comforted her at the first waiting bay on the other side, for over 30 minutes - until Mum was able to catch up.

For many reasons Ramadan is an exceptional time in the so-called Holy Land. Notably, freedom of movement changes as the permit system adjusts and Israel temporarily loosens access restrictions to allow thousands of otherwise excluded Palestinians to enter Jerusalem. According to OCHA, the UN's coordination agency for humanitarian affairs, on the second and third Fridays of Ramadan, Israeli forces allowed about 87,000 and 122, 000 Palestinians, respectively, into East Jerusalem for prayers.<sup>1</sup> Many of these people pass through Qalandia Checkpoint - the main and most direct access point between Jerusalem and the Occupied West Bank.

It was a relief for my colleagues and I, who were monitoring access to worship there during Ramadan, to watch most of the commuters with permits pass smoothly by us and in relatively swift time (though there were some disturbing exceptions). Regardless, it was a telling contrast to the norm encapsulated in the story above. Every day of the week, hundreds of ordinary Palestinians struggle through Qalandia, hoping to cross from one side of the Separation Barrier to the other for the purpose of basic everyday activities. Qalandia is but one of hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks throughout Occupied Palestine.

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<sup>1</sup> Protection of Civilians Report: Occupied Palestinian Territory | 22 May – 4 June 2018

## Questions for reflection

'Have you been paying attention?' is the name of a popular television quiz show and equally applies to the situation in Palestine and Israel. What are the ways you 'pay attention' and what are the factors that hinder or distract you from 'paying attention'?

We may feel overwhelmed and powerless in paying attention to what is happening in Palestine and Israel, and all the complexities of world politics, socio-economic realities, and disasters and tragedies. It can easily overwhelm the human spirit. What enables communities, local and global, to hold hope, and have the strength and resolve to 'stand firm'?

## Prayer

*"Then justice will dwell in the land and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.  
The effect of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." — Isaiah 32:16-17*

O God of life and love and peace,  
We witness the violence and injustice in your Holy Land  
And our hearts break.  
Our hearts break for all Palestinians -  
For the victims of violent attacks from Israelis  
For those who have endured decades of occupation and oppression  
For those whose homes and olive orchards have been demolished  
For those who languish in Israeli prisons and in the "open air prison" of Gaza  
For those without nearly enough water and electricity and medical care  
For those who are refugees, long displaced from their homes.  
Our hearts break for the Jewish people of Israel -  
For the victims of violent attacks from Palestinians  
For those who live with fear and insecurity  
For those who re-live the trauma of the Holocaust over and over.  
Our hearts break for the wider world -  
For those who are indifferent to the pain and suffering in your Holy Land  
For those who distort or turn their eyes from truth  
For those who fail to see the humanity of all your children.  
Heal us all, O God.  
Heal the broken and comfort the sorrowful.  
Give hope to the hopeless and courage to the fearful.  
Strengthen the peacemakers and reconcilers.  
Confront those who practice injustice and commit violence.  
We especially pray—  
That weapons of war be laid down  
That walls of separation and the machinery of occupation be dismantled  
That prisoners be released  
That demonizing of "the other" cease  
That political leaders seek the good of all people in Palestine and Israel.  
We pray also for ourselves—  
That our eyes will be opened to the ways in which our beliefs and actions have contributed to injustice and to violence.  
O God, whose heart breaks for the world,  
May your justice dwell in the land  
May your righteousness abide in fruitful fields  
May the effect of righteousness be quietness and trust forever  
May the effect of justice be peace — enduring peace.  
Amen

(Source: Mennonite prayer, <https://mcc.org/stories/prayer-palestine-israel>)

## Week 2: Luke 1:68-79

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has looked favourably on God’s people and redeemed them. God has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as God spoke through the mouth of God’s holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered God’s holy covenant, the oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before God all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare God’s ways, to give knowledge of salvation to God’s people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

Hope can be fragile, hard to find, elusive, when the lived experience of people is so desperate and difficult. This text is a narration of the way God has remained faithful to the ways of mercy and peace. The words of the prophets called for justice to roll down like rivers. To a people who carried in their DNA the experience of enslavement and persecution at the hands of their enemies, God’s faithfulness was a continual source of hope. The birth of every child gave way to hope for the community, with the hope that this new life may be part of the longed for change and transformation. The birth of the child Jesus came to be recognised as a fulfilment of the words of God’s holy prophets, that ‘by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace’. Sometimes, hope arises from beyond a community, and often in the midst of community, like the very human experience of the birth of a child that refreshes hope again.

## Luke 3: 1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke’s Gospel was written in the context of foreign invaders and influences in the land of Palestine in the centuries before the birth of Christ. First the influence of the Greek culture that followed the conquest by Alexander ‘the Great’, and then the occupation of the Roman army, which subsequently led to the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem. The people lived with the reality of foreign forces, rebellions, terrorism, and war as part of their own story.

Occupation and military force can lead to the silencing of those whose voices need to be heard and amplified, and a diminishing of courage. Nevertheless, John spoke truth to power, and was not constrained by the religious and political institutions of his day. He inspired people with the ancient words of Isaiah heard in a fresh way for the context in which John’s ministry took place: ‘Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God’.

## Stories by Ecumenical Accompanier - Rev Joan

Khan al Ahmar is a Bedouin community in Palestine's West Bank. Located on the outskirts of Jerusalem, it sits beside the road to Jericho. In the 1950's the residents were forcibly re-located here from the Negev Desert by the Israeli authorities.



In 2009 a school was built in this community from recycled tyres and mud bricks, with students now attending from five Bedouin communities. Beside Khan al Ahmar, overhead powerlines supply electricity to the nearby Kfar Adumim Israeli settlement, which is built illegally according to international law. Khan al Ahmar residents are not permitted to connect community to this power supply.

In April 2015, an Italian Non-Government Organisation donated solar panels to the Khan al Ahmar community. But on the day these solar panels arrived, the residents noticed Israeli military vehicles gathering on the surrounding hills. Realising the military personnel were there to oversee the removal of the panels, the residents phoned around for help, including to the Ecumenical Accompaniers in Jerusalem.



Soon after we arrived, we met Rabbi Arik Aschermann and several members of 'Rabbis for Human Rights.' As contractors entered the community and began removing solar panels, protected by the military, Rabbi Aschermann squatted on the ground and read aloud to them from the Torah.

He chose the story of the exodus from Egypt, challenging them all to reflect on their own history, and recall God's instruction to treat non-Jews or aliens with dignity, as they remembered their own suffering in Egypt.

Rabbi Aschermann was threatened with arrest, but he steadfastly continued his protest.



**'Women in Black.'** Every Friday, at a busy roundabout in West Jerusalem's retail district, a group of Jewish women and men hold a protest. Their placards, 'STOP THE OCCUPATION', are written in Hebrew, Arabic and English. Ecumenical Accompaniers attend the protest to offer support and observe the reactions of passers-by.



Meanwhile across the road, a Jewish flag is held aloft by a woman whose placard reads 'There IS no occupation – the land is ours.'

It's apparent that in this orthodox Jewish neighbourhood of West Jerusalem, 'Stop the Occupation' is an unpopular statement. Many bystanders yell abuse at the protesters; some even spit at them as they drive or cycle past.

One elderly member of the protest group is a Holocaust survivor. He told us he found it hard to believe that the Israeli government is treating Palestinians in ways that he and his family were treated by the Nazis in the 1930's and 1940's.



Despite the opposition they face, this courageous group **'Women in Black'** continues to protest Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. The members hope that their neighbours will stop and reconsider Israel's treatment of Palestinians who have lived in this land for centuries.

## Questions for reflection

Proverbs 31:8-9, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy".

What does it look like to speak up for others enduring hardship? To be a voice for the voiceless? What does advocacy look like in practice for you and your community? Can you give examples of your experience in advocacy when it happens locally, and globally? Or can you identify concerns and those things that dampen the opportunity to be involved in advocacy?

What biblical passages might provide a lens for advocacy?

## Prayer

### *Where are you, God? by Jan Sutch Pickard*

Just and merciful God,  
we glimpse your presence in the world you have created,  
its power and its beauty, music and poetry,  
its diversity, fertility, the possibility of food for everyone  
ancient olive trees and fruit to be harvested  
the dream of fullness of life for all your children:  
Yes, God, you are with us in this world.

Yet we see that power misused, beauty marred,  
Discord, lies and fear dividing humankind  
as well as concrete walls and barbed wire  
failure to share causing hunger or consuming anger.  
Where are you, God?

We hear the Good News that Jesus brought, the affirmation of the value of every  
human life,  
the Gospel that commands us to seek peace with justice;  
we understand that costly reconciliation is at its heart:  
Yes, God, you are with us in this world.

Yet we see that good news denied by apathy,  
mocked by prejudice, hatred and refusal to forgive,  
and we feel helpless in the face of suffering.  
Where are you, God?

You are present where women and men of good will still choose to live in your way,  
caring for creation and for each other, courageously speaking truth to power.

You are there when elderly people share their wisdom,  
And young people share their dreams.  
You are there when street children dance in the rain,  
where, over the rubble, kites are flying.  
You are present wherever, in this broken world, hope is alive.

(Source: PaxChristi, <http://paxchristi.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Where-are-you-God.pdf>)

## Week 3: Luke 3:7 - 18

*“John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

*And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”*

*And the soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

John’s fiercest criticism was reserved for those who exercised power - those from whom much should be expected, but who failed to deliver care and compassion to the people. John does not mince his words about the consequences of misusing power and privilege. He issues a call to ‘turn around’ - for the powerful to change their ways.

But to the ordinary people, the ones subject to Roman occupation and the legalism of the political and religious authorities, he has a different message. Continue to seek the well-being of others, offering practical care, compassion, and consolation. Do not abandon people in their time of need nor allow corruption to creep in to community practices. Jesus’ public ministry would also model this pattern of life, bringing healing, hope and transformation to people in their lived reality.

And to the soldiers who perhaps unexpectedly ask the question, ‘And we, what should we do?’, Jesus responds: ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages’. It is a response that assumes respect and dignity should be given to the people living with military occupation - without threats, accusations or abuse. In our time, the primary responsibility under international law for an occupying force has been articulated as caring for the needs and welfare of the population whose land they are occupying.

A study by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 2018 found that ‘half a century of occupation and appropriation of land and resources has impoverished the Palestinian people and, crucially, denied them the right to development’. The study suggests that both Israel and the international community have obligations under international and human rights law not only to avoid action that impedes development but to take affirmative steps to foster development in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. “The international community should shoulder its responsibility to promote development in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and ensure that the occupation and its enduring harm to the welfare of the Palestinian people is ended,” said Mahmoud Elkhafif, Coordinator of the Assistance to the Palestinian People Unit of UNCTAD.

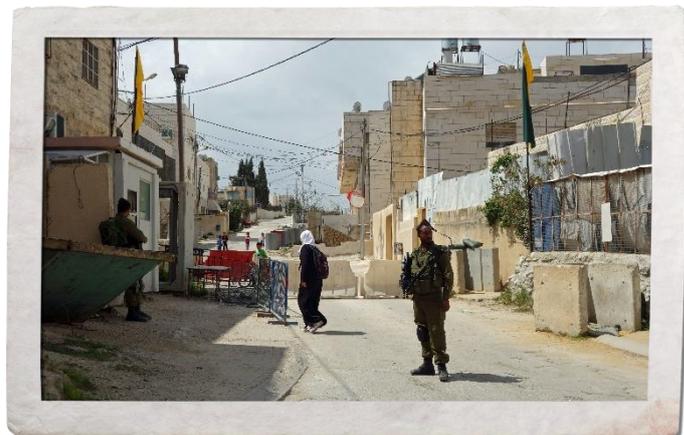
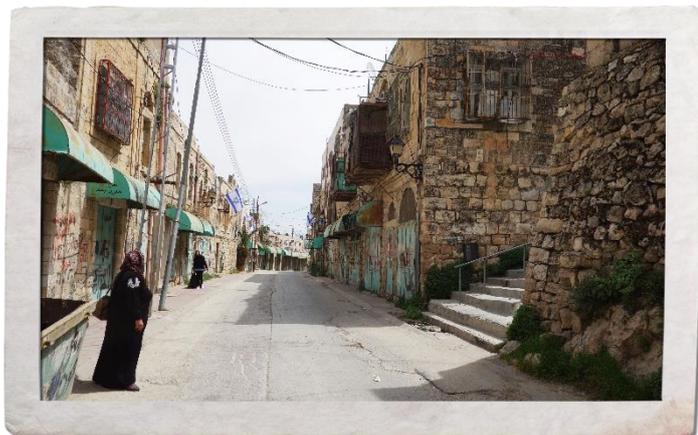
The study highlights the economic costs imposed by occupation in relation to Palestinian agriculture, water resources, fisheries, mining, tourism, communications, manufacturing and human capital. Under occupation, the Palestinian people and Government are not allowed to carry out essential tasks required for economic and social development to take place. This prevents them from enjoying the inalienable human right to development, which maintains that every human person and all peoples are entitled to freely participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development.

(Source: <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=1696>)

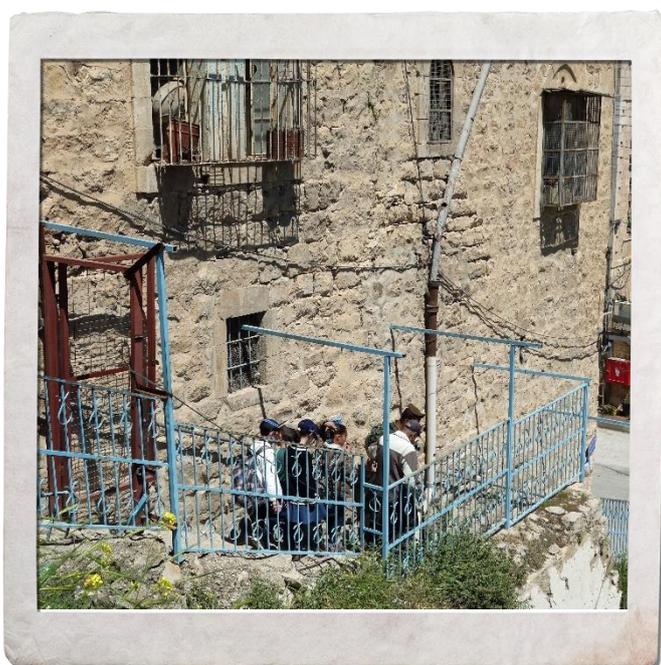
## Story by Ecumenical Accompanier - Nell

Experiencing the unrelenting, frustrating and suffocating reality of life under occupation you can easily succumb to feelings of helplessness and normality. You see the ugliness of human behaviour on display when one group of people know they have unfettered power to do whatever they like. So when I saw and heard Israeli soldiers acting to the contrary this really stood out and left an impression on me.

I was located for my 3 month placement in the north western region of the West Bank which is mainly an agricultural area. During the 3 months we were required to spend a few days in 2 other placements as each area is quite unique and experiences different issues and difficulties under occupation.



Hebron was one of the locations I chose to learn about and went there on a couple of occasions. One was on a Breaking the Silence tour (BtS). This is an organisation of ex Israeli military who have chosen to give their testimony, to speak up about their own actions and the mentality of military rule. They lead educational tours of Hebron and also speak in Israel about what the occupation is putting Palestinians through and also the negative effect it is having on their own psyche. From BtS I learnt so much about the mentality of the IDF. It was so eerie walking around the abandoned streets of the old city of Hebron. It is like a ghost town but is still home to over 160 000 Palestinians. It is the 600+ Israeli Settlers and equivalent number of soldiers stationed to protect them, however, that rule the streets of this ancient city, and they rule with a fierce hand. Some streets Palestinians are allowed to walk down but cannot drive down and there are some streets they are not permitted to go on at all. If Palestinians live on these streets they have to enter and exit their homes via the roof or the back door. Settlers on the other hand are free to go wherever they choose. BtS told us that the term the Israeli military use to clear an area of Palestinians is 'sterilization'. This put shivers down my spine, I couldn't believe my ears!



The other occasion I visited Hebron was to join our EAPPI team there for a few days. One of the main roles of this team was to monitor the school run for children accessing a primary school and kindergarten near a checkpoint. We would stand at the top of these stairs and observe the soldiers and settlers interaction with Palestinians young and old who must seek permission to pass through this checkpoint. As we were observing one day, to my surprise, I saw one of the soldiers walk up the stairs and assisted an elderly Palestinian man to descend down the stairs. My teammates said he did this all the time. I also saw him give little Palestinian kids high fives as they walked down the stairs. In the 3 months I was in the West Bank, I saw this soldier and only one other soldier act in this kind and friendly manner toward Palestinians.

As I mentioned above, the area I spent most of my time in was an agricultural area with many small villages and towns adversely affected by the dislocation and restriction of movement due to the building of the Wall and Settlements. The Separation barrier (or Wall) does not entirely follow the Armistice 'Green' line and is in fact more than twice its length. 85% of the Wall encroaches into the West Bank, confiscating Palestinian land in the process. Sections of the wall that don't follow the Green Line are considered illegal by the International Court of Justice. Any land that falls between the Wall and the Green line is known as the Seam Zone. Palestinians who have fields in this zone need to obtain a permit from Israel to cross over from the West Bank into their land. There are checkpoints and agricultural gates dotted along the Wall which we went to every morning to monitor what occurred.

It's worth pointing out that the gates are only open for very short periods of time. So soldiers turning up late and closing early has adverse repercussions. In the mornings they are mostly open between 30 to 45 minutes. They are also opened around lunchtime for 15 minutes and then in the afternoon for around 15 – 30 minutes. If people who have been working in the Seam Zone miss the last gate opening for the day, they have little option than to stay there overnight.

Even with valid permits, who is let through the gates is totally arbitrary and depends on what soldiers are on duty and their particular mood on the day. Some of the excuses the soldiers gave to deny Palestinians entry were:

- "Permit shows a different gate (you're only allowed to go through the gate written on your permit)"
- "dirty permit – had a coffee stain on it"
- "possession of a small speaker"
- "carrying a bicycle battery (person then put the battery into a friend's car who then drove through unsearched)"
- "looking too nice, clothes too clean"
- "carrying a mobile phone charger"



During the 3 months I went to the gates I think I saw the soldiers arrive early and open the gates on time only a handful of times. Mostly they were 15 minutes to 30 minutes late. On one occasion they were 1 ¾ hours late by which time half of the Palestinian men had turned around and gone home. When the soldiers finally arrived, and the Palestinians were all let through, we approached the soldiers to ask why they were so late. In the course of the conversation one of the soldiers appeared to be more forthright and honest. So, when the other soldiers left us, I decided to ask this one soldier some more personal questions. I always tried to engage in conversation with soldiers who were willing to do so, to gain a glimpse into their thinking. This young soldier told me he had been in the service for 7 months. I said "it must be quite difficult being in this environment". He replied, "it's not so bad for us but it's worse for the Palestinians, they are treated inhumanely but I try not to do that." He asked us who we were and enquired about the program and said we were doing a good job.



I am so glad I had this conversation and witnessed these acts of kindness by the soldiers. Soldiers who were not abusing the power they had and who sought the welfare of the people whose land they were occupying. It's so easy and dangerous to paint groups of people with the same brush. Not every soldier wants to be there, not every soldier wants to act in ways that strip Palestinians of their humanity and ultimately themselves in the process.

## Questions for reflection

“What then should we do?” What might you, as an individual or part of a community, be called to do about what is happening in Palestine? Your role may be many and varied eg:

- practical service and encouraging others to use their gifts of service
- encouraging and supporting those engaged in the EAPPI program and the communities which provide them hospitality and welcome
- gathering stories and sharing them in your networks
- advocating for justice
- standing beside people who are oppressed
- encouraging others to work for justice
- standing beside those who suffer and encouraging others to use their caring gifts
- educating the church and wider community on justice issues in Palestine and Israel
- speaking truth to power and offering a prophetic word to challenge injustice
- pray

## Prayer

*A prayer by His Highness Atallah Hanna Archbishop of Sebastia from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem*

We ask O Lord: have mercy on us ...

O Lord, Jesus Christ our God, our Saviour. You have accepted to be incarnated in this holy land. You came into this world to drag it out of darkness into light. You have suffered pain, death, the cross, burial, and resurrection for our sake.

We pray asking you to have mercy on us, to forgive our sins and mistakes and protect the deep-rooted Christian presence in our country, as we became few in numbers because of migration, but the remaining few are not a minority, and we pray that the Christians in our country be salt and yeast for this land, and a source of good and blessing in this holy spot of the world.

We ask you, O Lord, to have mercy on our Palestinian people, our youth and our children in particular, as this people suffered many grievances. Innocent people are being killed, our youth, our children are being targeted. And more wounded and disabled people are suffering from pain, distress and grief.

We are imploring You to bestow Your mercy from heaven on each individual suffering from sadness, grief and sorrow. We pray all together for the sake of the families of martyrs and prisoners; we pray for our Palestinian people and for the sake of the achievement of justice and genuine peace in this land.

We are longing for the achievement of justice in this land whose people suffered a lot, we strongly yearn for peace in this land in which peace was repressed.

We pray and ask you O Lord of sacrifice and Salvation to bestow your justice on us in order to grant the Palestinian people security, peace and stability far away from the language of violence, murdering and death.

We ask you, O Lord, for the sake of this Orient which is suffering from wars, terrorism, the culture of killing and violence, to give peace to the peoples of Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen which suffered from destruction, chaos and despair.

We pray and ask you O Lord to grant Your Mercy to the victims of terrorism in our region, who are the Christians and all citizens; we pray in order to achieve the culture of dialogue, love, brotherhood and reconciliation far away from the language of wars, killing and violence. Enough chaos, wars and injustices and it is time for our peoples to live in Peace in this tortured Orient.

O Lord, we are in front of you enduring our sufferings, sorrow, tears of our mothers, and injuries of our youth, so grant us Your Mercy, protect our country and guide all of us to do good deeds and disseminate the values of love, compassion and brotherhood among mankind.

## Week 4: Luke 1:39 - 56

*“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.”*

Mary, a village girl from Nazareth, learnt through an angel that she had found favour with God, and that she would bear a child who would be named Jesus. It is not the ‘good news’ this young woman would have expected to hear. She hurriedly relocated herself to a town in the hill country of Judea to avoid gossip, suspicion, abuse, and disgrace. In those months which she used for retreat and reflection, she came to learn that God’s favour is a source of joy in the midst of struggle, pain, suffering and hardship. The challenges that are faced can be a catalyst for hope even in the midst of despair. Mary’s song of praise to God, known as the Magnificat, looks at disruption and disturbance, and displacement of those who hold power and privilege: “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:51-53).

Mary’s song recasts what it means to be favoured and expresses God’s radical concerns for the oppressed that is a catalyst for reformation and renewal. It opens our spiritual and moral imaginations to new realms of possibility. The contemporary yearnings for liberation from those entrapped in valleys of despair today find resonance with Mary’s song.

## Story by Ecumenical Accompanier - Nell

My last week was by far the most painful time of being in the West bank. Not because of anything I witnessed but because I wasn't ready to leave. Saying goodbye to different groups of people over that last week was extremely gut wrenching.

Even today, 1 ½ years since I left, I tear up very easily thinking about my time in Palestine. I didn't encounter many severe or traumatic events, nor did I witness excessive violence. What causes me to tear up is remembering the people. By far the most powerful impression I have of my time in the West Bank is the spirit of the Palestinian people.

In the face of such unbelievable daily hardship and human rights violations the spirit of Palestinians shone through. Whether this was men waiting patiently in the cold, huddled around fires as they waited to be allowed through the checkpoints to go to work; whether it was seeing little kids having fun playing in their concrete kindergarten yard as having a garden is nigh impossible due to the severe water restrictions placed on Palestinian towns by Israel; seeing the numerous cars and people lined along a street to welcome home a relative who has served time as a political prisoner in an Israeli jail or hearing the sounds of fireworks in the evening air as people are celebrating a wedding (on more than one occasion I thought I was hearing gun fire but the locals always put me straight – “no, it's our way of celebrating!”).

They certainly know how to find joy and have fun despite their circumstances. Nowhere was this most powerfully seen than recently when Israel bombed a Cultural Centre in Gaza and the very next day a group and musicians and dancers performed on the rubble –  
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/22/our-memories-have-vanished-the-palestinian-theatre-destroyed-in-a-bomb-strike>

Their capacity and tenacity to stay and persevere through 51 years of occupation, which has largely been ignored by the majority of the world, is remarkable. We always asked the Palestinians we had personal contact with “do you have hope” and they would all invariably say “but what else can we do”!



Nowhere was this capacity to endure hardship and active yearning for peace evidenced more powerfully than through encountering an extraordinary man, Issa. Issa is someone we got to know during our 3 months stay, who one of my teammates coined, the Gandhi of Palestine, which is a fair call.

Issa is a peace and nonviolence activist who was paralyzed by a dum dum (an exploding bullet which is illegal under International law but which Israel has repeatedly used - even to this day). His spinal cord was shattered. This happened during the second intifada whilst he was ushering children off the street to get them away from the tear gas the Israeli military were firing. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> year anniversary of the shooting Issa wrote an open letter to the 2 anonymous soldiers who shot him, inviting the shooter to come to his house.

The Israeli journalist Gideon Levy wrote an article and published this open letter from Issa in the newspaper Haaretz. Here are a few excerpts that give an understanding as to the life and character of Issa:

*"I think about the soldier all the time. Not for revenge. I think he is unfortunate. A victim like me, if not more. I wrote him because I hope that one day we might be able to meet and I will be able to change something for him. To clean his head. To purify his heart. I hope that I will move all the soldiers who killed Palestinians to our side. That I can take them from the side of crime and hate to the side of beauty and peace".*

[Part of the open letter] *"I remember you. I remember your confused face when you stood above my head and wouldn't let people come to my aid. I remember how my voice grew weaker, when I said to you: 'Be humane and let my parents help me.' I keep all those pictures in my head. How I lay on the ground, trying to get up but unable. How I fought my shortness of breath, which was caused by the blood that was collecting in my lungs, and the voice that was weakened because my diaphragm was hurt. I won't hide from you that despite this, I had pity for them. I felt that I was strong, because I had powers I didn't know about before."*

*"I accepted it all. I didn't ask why it happened and why it had to be me, as other people ask. I started my new life, without any anger."*

*"His ties with the Israelis [peace activists] continued. Not only did they continue, they were strengthened. My feelings didn't change. I don't feel hatred for anyone. Only for the politicians who drag us, the ordinary people on both sides, into becoming victims of their power struggles and their interests. The Israelis visit me all the time. We have a great many Israeli friends. They sleep at our place and eat from our plates with us. We don't hate Jews and Israelis. If there is anger, it is for the method of the government, which is causing all this suffering".*

The full article can be found at <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4751570>



I would like to end by recalling something that occurred in my final week as I was standing at one of the agricultural gates with Palestinian Muslim women as they waited for access to go to work. Mostly they were farmers going to work in their fields. The soldiers were on time but 2 of them had difficulty in opening the gates. The women were joking a little with the soldiers about it. The soldiers were trying for about 5 minutes to unlock the padlock and in the process their hands became greasy. One of the women took out her water bottle and through the wire in the gate poured water over one of the soldiers hands so he could wash them. It was a small gesture that spoke volumes and really moved me. It spoke to the Palestinian spirit. In this demoralizing, humiliating environment this woman displayed such a beautiful act of kindness to her oppressor. She had not lost her humanity, this environment was not going to define her.

I am honoured to have met such a man as Issa and this nameless woman and so many other amazing men, women and children who showed me what it looks like to love your enemy. That despite the challenges they face their tenacious spirit gave them strength and hope.

## Questions for reflection

In light of the grave circumstances Palestinians live under with an 'actual' enemy so to speak, it is sobering to consider the responses by Issa and the Palestinian woman at the gate. It reflects what Palestinians call *sumud* - the steadfast refusal to be provoked or demoralised in the face of provocation, violence and destruction. A patient determination to carry on in spite of all the difficulties of living under military occupation. Consider for a moment if you were faced with a similar situation - what would be your natural reaction? What might we learn from the Palestinian people about patient determination even when things are difficult and desperate?

## Prayer

*Prayer by Pastor Imad Hadad, Pastor of Lutheran church of hope Ramallah*

Lord Jesus Christ, with heavy, tired, and burdened hearts we come to you;  
give us rest and teach us to be like you and carry your light yoke.  
Break through the darkness of our situation of injustice and war with your radiant light,  
so our children may see the light of life,  
and experience the power of Love that overcomes vengeance, hatred, fear, and death.  
Lord, you came so that we may have life and have it in abundance;  
we ask you to open our eyes and hearts in order to experience true life.  
We ask you to lead us in the paths of abundant life  
so that we can teach our children and give them the example true life that we learn  
from you.  
Lord, you said that the truth will set us free,  
may your truth guide us out of the bondage of fear, hatred, and extremism  
so that our children can enjoy life in the land that you blessed with your presence.  
May your truth ground us and our children in true hope that is established with faith  
and built with love casting away all fears that hinder us from meeting and accepting  
the other.  
Lord you blessed the children, and said "to them is the kingdom of heaven"  
we ask that our children may experience your blessing in their daily lives.  
May they grow up in peace without fear, may their dreams come true  
without the terror of checkpoints, prisons, and guns.  
Lord we ask you to grace our children with peaceful and joyful childhood.  
We ask you to open the eyes of politicians and decision makers  
so that they can respect, admire, and protect the lives of our children  
against all struggles and wars.

## Moving into Christmas: Luke 2:1 - 20

*"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favours!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."*

**The work of the shepherds** was considered to be dirty and polluted, and therefore they experienced exclusion. How wonderful then that the shepherds were the first to learn about the birth of Jesus. Tradition has it that they were told the news by an angel in the Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahur, next to Bethlehem. The glory of God shone all around them, and a multitude of the heavenly host declared, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who God favours!'. Those who God favours was redefined; the shepherds were included among them. The excluded were now entrusted to share the good news that had been given to them, enabling them to be the agents of new perspectives and wisdom to be shared - from the margins.

In recent times, shepherding has become much more difficult for the Palestinians because of a lack of open land due to the expansion of Jewish settlements. The 220,000 residents of the Bethlehem area (including over 20,000 living in three refugee camps - Dheisheh, Aida and Beit Jibrin) are surrounded by 19 Israeli settlements and 100,000 Israeli settlers. The settlements are considered illegal under international law and the International Court of Justice. Part of the separation barrier is built on valuable farming land, also deemed illegal under international law. The land itself has been confiscated illegally, and the wall has been built illegally on Palestinian land.

It is interesting to note that Bethlehem sits on an enormous aquifer, which has been an ancient water source for Jerusalem - even before the birth of Christ. Jerusalem was needing to cope with the pilgrims to the city, and the water supply was contaminated by the animals slaughtered in the temple. Bethlehem provided the source of fresh water. Indeed, Bethlehem was located on top of the aquifer as a defensive military installation to protect the water supply. The Bible refers to the best tasting water coming from Bethlehem.

Today, the confiscation of fertile agricultural land from Palestinians is justified in order to ensure 'security construction'. In the meantime, Palestinians are put on severe water restrictions while settlers have unlimited access to water.

“You, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).

**Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem** for the census ordered by the Roman occupiers of the homeland of the Jewish people. The census was to ensure accountability for the taxes owed to the Empire. Mary and Joseph were offered a space probably in the home of relatives. The earliest Christian text says there was no room in the *'kataluma'* which can mean inn, but more frequently refers to the upstairs guest room in a family home. So a separate space was prepared for them, safe and comfortable, but one they had to share with the animals at night.

The first century village of Bethlehem Ephrata was in fact a rural farming community in the hill country that grew food, and raised sheep and goats for the city of Bethlehem. Every firstborn male lamb from the area around Bethlehem was considered holy, set aside for sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. They had to be perfect, and were given special attention. For that reason they were kept under cover at night rather than loose in the fields being guarded by shepherds. As well, vulnerable animals would be brought inside to protect them from the cold, or harm or theft. It is suggested that rather than a 'stable', the more correct translation is 'stall' for the birthing of the sacrificial unblemished lambs. It was into this small space that the new parents welcomed their baby, who they named Jesus. And later they offered welcome to the shepherds into the space as well.

The building of new relationships happens where God is present, where strangers can become friends, where the insignificant is given significance in God's economy. In contrast, the wall has divided families, and separated the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem - the sites of Jesus's birth and death - for the first time in 2,000 years.

Bethlehem has traditionally been able to welcome foreign visitors during the Christmas season who come to see the huge Christmas tree in Bethlehem's Manger Square that marks the birth of Jesus Christ, and to visit the Church of the Nativity. The 'inns' (hotels) are usually full. In 2003, an 8m high concrete wall with watchtowers and gates was erected in Bethlehem - part of Israel's barrier built in and around the West Bank. With all the troubles, visitors have been less frequent, and more likely to have a quick day trip to Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity as part of a Holy Land tour, and board the bus immediately afterwards. Rev. Alex Awad (Bethlehem Bible College) says: 'Of Christian pilgrims, who visit Bethlehem in their thousands, only a handful express interest in the lives of Christians in Bethlehem today'. The tourists are not spending any money in the city. Hotels report up to 80% of their rooms are empty. This downturn in tourism has had a profound impact on people who depend on tourists to provide a source of income from the sale of their craft and wares. A BBC report says about 40% of the Bethlehem economy relies directly on tourism, and selling religious items like traditional Nativity sets made out of olive wood grown in the holy land. For centuries, such religious items have been sold to visiting pilgrims. However since the town was separated from Jerusalem by Israel's barrier, most tourists now enter through an Israeli checkpoint. Local souvenir sellers say that restricted access to the city has greatly affected their trade. They also complain about a system that sees large Palestinian stores pay a hefty commission to guides who bring in the tourists, which means many of the smaller shops lose out.

The Prince of Peace was born in a time of ambiguity and military occupation that has parallels with today's context for Palestinian people. We celebrate that God came in the person of the infant Jesus: 'Immanuel' - God with us!" "The Word was made flesh and lived among us".

The EAPPI program enables people from all walks of life to live among the indigenous inhabitants of the Holy Land, to journey with them as they seek a lasting peace that is met with justice.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky. (Psalm 85:10-11)

And as for peace? "As long as the city of peace is walled, peace itself is walled" (*Vera Baboun, former mayor of Bethlehem*).

## Story by Ecumenical Accompanier - Nell



One of my regrets was not being able to spend more time in Bethlehem during my time as an EA. I went there for only 1 day during our training and couldn't manage a return visit due to the location and nature of my role. I can however identify with the above commentary about Bethlehem as I encountered those very things in other areas of the West Bank. The devastation to the economy and small business owners after loss of trade due to the building of the Wall on Palestinian land. Not only trade with neighbouring villages but the loss of trade from Israelis as well. In towns near where I lived shops had signs in Hebrew as well as Arabic, as Israelis used to frequent them prior to the Wall. Now the Israeli government has made it illegal for Israelis to go into Palestinian towns and cities, installing huge red signs making this very clear.



I sat with a shepherding family in the Jordan Valley as they recounted how the Israeli authority had demolished their home 3 times. The authorities said they didn't have a permit to be on the land that has been in their family for decades. This family were regularly given notice by the soldiers to vacate for 12 hours at a time for 'military exercises'. They had to either be gone from their home from 6am to 6pm or 6pm to 6am. During this time they were forced to flee to the nearby hills leaving their herds behind. If they ran out of food or water, so be it!

I also was very grateful to meet with the living stones – the Palestinian Christians. One of our roles as EAs is to offer support and solidarity to Palestinian Christians, and extend hope. I attended a church in Jerusalem a number of times and also in Nablus. It was so enriching being able to attend different types of worship services - so familiar yet different at the same time to what I have encountered here in Australia. Yet it is the same Lord that we sang and prayed to and found a connection.

But tragically, the place where Christianity started is in danger of losing its indigenous Christian population as the numbers of Palestinian Christians continue to plummet. Prior to 1948 this oldest Christian community made up 20% of the population, today they are around 1%. I think it will be a travesty if, in the land where Jesus walked, no Indigenous believers would remain living there. It saddens me deeply that some Christians actively endorse and support the occupation.

My time with EAPPI didn't come to an end when I left Palestine...that was only the beginning of my journey alongside those suffering under the weight of occupation - both Palestinians and Israelis.

Part of the role as an EA is to undertake advocacy, both in the field but more so upon return home. Palestinians I encountered would often plead for us to go home and tell their story...they feel abandoned by the world. So I have not stopped advocating loud and clear around the injustices I witnessed and try to stay connected to the people and issues as they continue to unfold.



I have been privileged to spend 3 weeks recently with an inspiring young Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem. As we travelled around Australia I heard her talk many times about the suffocating environment of the place she calls home - the watchtowers and soldiers watching her 24/7, the lack of access to water - a fundamental right, not having gardens and natural oasis to escape to as these are confiscated to make way for the illegal Israel settlements. But I also heard her talk of her enormous capacity to show love and hope in the midst of those daily struggles.

Many things Areej mentioned so powerfully impacted me. One question Areej posed in her presentations was “is the Holy Land still Holy?” What makes it a holy place? Is it the sacred sites of the Bible, or the cultural significance of the land, or the interactions between people and their personal lives that make a place Holy?”

This seems an apt question as we enter Christmas. For me, after living there for 3 months and seeing what Palestinians endure, I can say that yes I believe the Holy land is still Holy. It was significant going to the sacred places where the Christian gospels report Jesus spent time. But, overwhelmingly, it was the impact of the local people themselves that left me in awe. I don't know how they – Christians and Muslims - continue to maintain hope, gratitude, resilience and such a welcoming hospitality. They made a stranger feel welcome from day one and never ceased to find laughter and joy in what they had and in each other. I don't know how anyone can live under those circumstances without God giving them the capacity to do so. So when I am asked did I see God at work in the Holy land I say yes...I saw God in the Indigenous people!

Photos by Ecumenical Accompanier – Peter, who was based in Bethlehem at Christmas



Bethlehem, Manger Square. Boy looks at the Palestinian resistance nativity scene.



Bethlehem, Manger Square. Tear gas canisters and hand grenades as Christmas ornaments



Al-Khader near Bethlehem - Local school teaches argue with a local Israeli military commander over the use of force directed at students leaving school



Al-Khader near Bethlehem - Teargas fired by Israeli border guards plumes over the village during clashes as students leave the local schools

## Questions for reflection

After reading these studies about the current day reality how would you answer the question "is the Holy Land still Holy"?

If you have visited Palestine / Israel before or are planning to in the near future, have these reflections given you food for thought? Are there places, people and experiences you will seek out after reading this Advent resource? It is our hope this Advent study will be a starting point, and that you will actively seek ways to engage in seeking a just peace for the people of Palestine / Israel.

## Prayer

*Prayer by Revd John C Howard-Norman West Pennine Moors Circuit of the Methodist Church Jerusalem*

Lord Jesus, when you walked the streets of Palestine, you knew what it was like to live under occupation. You cared for soldier and civilian alike. You walked the extra mile in the example you gave of love in action, even across the divisions of your time. We pray today for the people of the Holy Land, Israeli and Palestinian, Jew, Muslim, Druze and Christian.

In this rich and diverse population there is so much fear, so much suspicion, so much hatred, so much injustice, so much history and so much division. Inspire your people today with that same love you showed so long ago and that same quest for justice - that we may overcome the failings of the past and enable a new community to grow where all the children of Abraham may live in Peace with one another, in mutual respect.

May all the people of this land turn away from violence and hatred, learn anew of how to respect each other and find that true Shalom where every person is valued, every right respected and every dream cherished. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who proclaimed blessed are the peacemakers, in every age. Amen.

### **How Long, O Lord, Will Justice Take?**

Tune: GREENSLEEVES 8.7.8.7 with Refrain ("What Child Is This?")

How long, O Lord, will justice take? It seems today our hearts will break.  
As women rise to tell the truth, their voices go unheeded.  
God show us what will be: you're building your community!  
You cast the mighty down and lift the hurt and lowly.

How long, O Lord, will mercy take? It seems today our hearts will break.  
When immigrants seek safety here, they're told, "You are not welcome!"  
God show us what will be: you're building your community!  
You cast the mighty down and lift the hurt and lowly.

How long, O Lord, will kindness take? It seems today our hearts will break.  
As guns are sold and glorified, our children suffer violence.  
God show us what will be: you're building your community!  
You cast the mighty down and lift the hurt and lowly.

O God of justice, love and peace, we pray that kindness will increase.  
We pray that all may seek your way and put faith into practice.  
God show us what will be: you're building your community!  
Lord, may we be a church that works to bring your justice.

Biblical Reference: Luke 1:46-55

Tune: Traditional English melody ("What Child Is This?") (MIDI)

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