

## **A WORD OF RESPECT AND ESTEEM FOR A GREAT LEADER**

### **PRESIDENT YASSER ARAFAT**

*“Then I looked again at all the injustice that goes on in this world. The oppressed were crying, and no one would help them. No one would help them, because their oppressors had power on their side” (Ecclesiastes 4:1).*

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center Jerusalem joins millions of its Palestinian brothers and sisters in Palestine and throughout the world along with many millions more from all continents in mourning the death of President Yasser Arafat.

For forty years Arafat struggled for the liberation of his beloved country, Palestine. He was the father figure of the Palestinians. In his life, Arafat traveled the world tirelessly presenting the just case of his people. He met with kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers. He represented the Palestinians before many international forums, not least the United Nations. He was able to wrest international recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to a sovereign and independent state. For his faithful endeavors in seeking peace, he was awarded the Noble Peace Prize. He came to embody and personify the struggle of his people. The Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular saw Arafat symbolizing and epitomizing the spirit of Palestine. Through his hard work and persistence, the Palestinian people regained their Palestinian identity.

Mr. Arafat hoped to achieve peace with justice in his lifetime. He worked hard to bring about the end of the illegal Israeli occupation of his homeland. The pressure, however, was always on him to make more concessions to Israel in spite of the fact that Israel continues to devour most of the Palestinian land on the West Bank including East Jerusalem as well as in the Gaza Strip. He was willing to make and accept peace with Israel – “the peace of the brave” – provided that Israel withdraws from all the territories it occupied in the 1967 war so that a viable, sovereign, independent, and democratic Palestine would be established alongside the state of Israel. The government of Israel, however, never wanted to implement the stipulations of international law and the many United Nations’ resolutions regarding Palestine. In faithfulness to his people and their legitimate rights, Arafat would not consent to further concessions and had to pay the price of political and physical isolation.

Arafat was forced into internal exile and the Israeli army demolished most of his Ramallah compound. Yet he preferred to live in a small area of his delapidated building rather than to betray his own people by making a false and untenable peace that will never endure.

During more than three years of confinement he continued to receive people, local and international, into his small compound. He welcomed them with his usual

graciousness, spoke to them about the injustice, and stretched out his hand for an honorable peace that would end the long Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and usher in the establishment of the Palestinian state for both Muslims and Christians. Under the weight of enormous responsibilities, political pressures, and tight Israeli army restrictions, his health gave in and he sought medical attention in France. Fourteen days later he died.

The French Government honored him as a head of state. The Egyptian government and the Arab League paid their last respect in an awesome and stirring funeral in Cairo on November 12, 2004. More than sixty countries were represented most of them by their heads of state. That same afternoon, an Egyptian army helicopter brought him to his compound in Ramallah where tens of thousands of Palestinians were waiting to bid him their final farewell. It was an emotional farewell of an orphaned people at the loss of their beloved father. He was buried in a temporary grave at the Muqata'a awaiting the time when he would be interred at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Mr. Arafat died lifting his voice for the liberation of Palestine. While awaiting his funeral, a little Palestinian boy was interviewed on TV. He was wearing the kufiah, the Palestinian head dress, as President Arafat always wore it. With great confidence and pride the boy said, "we are all Yasser Arafat." In essence this is the message of the Palestinians. They will continue the struggle and carry on the legacy of their late president until the illegal Israeli occupation ends and Palestine is free.

Indeed, a very important chapter in the life of the Palestinian people has come to an end with the death of President Arafat. We mourn his passing away and we offer each other condolences. At the same time, we pray to God that the new Palestinian leadership that has assumed responsibility will resume a unified struggle by walking the way of peace with justice.

We call on our friends abroad to renew their efforts in impressing upon their governments the need for the government of Israel to respect and implement international law which would be the requisite basis for the just peace that would create a livable future for both Palestinians and Israelis.

*"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a place of safety in times of trouble. Those who know you, Lord, will trust you; you do not abandon anyone who comes to you." (Psalm 9:9)*

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center  
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www.sabeel.org  
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