

A feast of inclusion

By Munib Younan

OCCUPIED JERUSALEM — This year we were blessed with a rare opportunity to celebrate the Jewish High Holidays at the same time as the Holy Month of Ramadan. Both Ramadan and Yom Kippur call for repentance and fasting. Sukkot, which commemorates the Hebrews wandering homeless in the wilderness of Sinai after their deliverance from oppression in Egypt, invites pondering the wanderings in this life and reminds us we are all just pilgrims and wanderers in God's world. And at the centre of it all is Jerusalem, with all its pluralistic richness, not only a Holy City to the three monotheistic faiths, but also claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians as their capital. Of all places in God's creation, it is meant to be a place open to all and shared by all.

This month of feasts should have encouraged us all to see hope and promise together in the City of Peace. Instead, it became a showcase for exclusive claims of one religion over another, of freedom for some at the expense of others.

On the road to Jerusalem the first day of Sukkot, I was shocked to see a truck with two large stone blocks engraved with words proclaiming them to be the “cornerstones of the Third Temple”. Adherents from the Christian Evangelical Right and some Jewish zealots were once again trying to begin the Third Temple on the sacred Temple Mount to hasten the coming of the Messiah. The problem is that the “Temple Mount” overlaps the “Haram Al Sharif”, the third holiest site for Muslims, which now holds the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosques. There have been several plots to destroy these Muslim sites in order to build this Third Temple by zealots who disregard the unequivocal ruling of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate that it is forbidden for Jews to walk on this holy site because the Third Temple can only be built when the Messiah arrives.

This harvest feast of Sukkot — which should be a sacred time to celebrate deliverance from oppression and abundant life — has become for some a call to “liberate” the Temple Mount from “Arab occupation” and to push out one religion in order to claim exclusive rights for another! This makes a mockery of the Christian and Jewish God of love and justice and thwarts those of us striving to promote common values of tolerance and mutual respect for all of humanity. Thankfully, there are institutions in place such as the High Court of Justice in Israel, which has so far rejected a request from the Temple Mount Faithful to put these cornerstones in place because of the provocative implications.

In order to protect the right of the Jewish and right-wing Evangelical Christians to worship as they like, Palestinians were locked behind barricades, closed-off streets and even denied access to their holy sites. Though these actions were justified as “security measures”, they were arbitrary and inconsistent. These measures do not

guarantee security; they only guarantee inconvenience and humiliation and increase the chance that people might be provoked.

During, this season of Holy Days, Jews were also periodically denied access to pray at one of their holy sites, the Tomb of the Patriarchs — Cave of Machpelah in Hebron — in order to give precedence to Ramadan prayers.

Many Palestinian Christians, including myself, treasure sharing our Jewish and Muslim neighbours' feasts and joining them in prayers for justice, peace and reconciliation. I just experienced the beauty and richness of a celebration in a sukkah with Jewish friends and a blessed Ramadan iftar with Muslim friends. We have so much to learn from one another when we honour and respect one another's traditions and we must work to create an environment in which our religious celebrations do not continue on a path of exclusivity.

If Jesus were to look out at Jerusalem today, he would weep again over a Jerusalem that is being turned into the exclusive realm of one group at the expense of others. Justice and truth telling are necessary for the birth of peace and reconciliation. Faith leaders cannot be silent when religion is used to provoke conflict and justify exclusive rights for one group and collective punishment for another.

We ask you, fellow Christians, Jews, Muslims and all people of good conscience, to help us preserve the multi-faceted character, holiness and inclusivity of this great city by affirming that Jerusalem is still the Holy City for all and especially for the three Peoples of the Book, where all have the same right of free access to pray, without permits and permission from the powerful.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus still calls us to higher ground: a Feast of Inclusion and a New Jerusalem where all are welcomed, all are equal and all are equally valued. We hold fast to our vision where someday, Christians, Muslims and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians — all people — will one day be able to freely celebrate our diverse but equally sacred feasts. We pray for a religious awakening of justice and reconciliation that puts an end to occupation and oppression, suicide bombings and drive-by shootings, terrorism and counterterrorism, targeted assassinations and incursions.

The Book of Revelation in Chapters 22-23 shares a vision of the river of life running through the Holy City, and on the banks of that river is the Tree of Life, whose leaves are medicine for the Healing of the Nations. I was reminded of this every worship service for 18 years as pastor in the Lutheran Church in Ramallah, where I gazed at this hopeful vision in the stained glass windows there. May this inclusive vision embrace us all.

The writer is the Evangelical Lutheran Church Bishop of Palestine and Jordan. This article was contributed to The Jordan Times by the Common Ground News.

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