

Sabeel's 2002 Christmas Message

“Unto us a child is born”

*For a child has been born for us,
A son given to us;
Authority rests upon his shoulders;
And he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
And there shall be endless peace...
With justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore
(Isaiah 9:6-7).*

This passage of the prophet Isaiah is a song of liberation and joy. Christians have interpreted it as a reference to the birth of Christ. It is certainly one of the most beautiful poems of the Old Testament.

In its original context in life, this poem had to do with the overthrow of an oppressive occupation. It was probably written in the aftermath of an Assyrian invasion of parts of east Jordan that extended to the coastal region of the Mediterranean Sea. The inhabitants were totally subjugated and oppressed. Isaiah describes them as living in thick darkness, anguish, and gloom.

It is worth noting that our region of the world has always experienced invasions and conquests from the dominant powers of the times. In fact, Palestine has always, geographically, resembled a corridor. It was a thoroughfare for people crossing from north to south and vice versa. It linked Egypt, the major power in the south with the successive empires of the north. Conquerors passed through it and had to subdue and control it.

In this specific beautiful poem, Isaiah envisions an end to the Assyrian occupation of the land. All the instruments of war will be burned by fire and a new divinely gifted king will reign. He will end the violence and establish a kingdom of peace based on truth and justice. For Isaiah as for many people throughout history, the possibility of peace has always been present in the imagination and dreams of human beings. Why cannot people live in peace? Why do they have wars? Why do so many people have to be killed? This poem lifts up the hope for a new day when, after the occupation has ended, the new king will be recognized as the “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace”. In other words, he would possess all the essential qualities and abilities to bring an end to war and to usher a permanent peace and prosperity.

Such a vision of “endless peace...with justice and righteousness...forevermore” was never realized,

neither in Isaiah's time nor at any other time, in the history of the world since it has to be based on the power of arms, violence, and destruction. Christians believe that the vision of an enduring peace came closest to its actualization in the coming of Jesus Christ. His birth was, indeed, the non-violent entrance of God into the world. Circumstantially, Jesus came into a world similar to that which Isaiah described. Isaiah was referring to an Assyrian occupation. Jesus was born under a Roman occupation when people were also longing for liberation and peace.

It is important to emphasize that there is nothing called a benevolent occupation. No matter how benign any occupation claims to be, it is unacceptable and undesirable by the occupied. This is the way it was in the time of Isaiah as well as in the time of Jesus, and it is still the same today for the Palestinians; except, maybe, for a few weak souls who have been co-opted by the occupying regime and have become collaborators with it and beneficiaries of it. Most people, however, long for liberation as, indeed, do the Palestinians who long to see the end of the oppressive yoke of Israel. Yet most people think of liberation as being possible only through military might. For the prophet Isaiah, the potential of real peace lies in the reversal and abrogation of war when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more"(Is 2:4).

Some of us believe that this vision of peace is achievable for Israelis and Palestinians today. What needs to happen is for Israel to lift its oppressive domination and end its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and accept the resolution of the conflict on the basis of international law and not on its own laws. On the one hand, the government of Israel is literally crushing the Palestinians until they succumb to its own demands for peace by accepting further land concessions. On the other hand, the Palestinian resistance is using all the means and methods available to it to insist on international legitimacy based on UN resolutions. Obviously, since Israel is by far much stronger militarily we continue to witness the total suppression and destruction of the Palestinian people.

Isaiah's vision for peace is realistic but conditional. It demands of both the Israelis and Palestinians to "...beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks [neither] nation shall...lift up sword against nation, neither shall...learn war any more". Such conditions must apply equally to both the Israelis and Palestinians and not to the Palestinians alone. If Israel is asking the Palestinians to disarm for the sake of a permanent peace, is it willing to do the same for the sake of the same objective? This is the revolution that Isaiah was talking about. Many of us would love to see it happen. Unfortunately, the history of nations and individuals has always been a history where people learned the art of war and violence.

Even the psalmist praises God for his military training, "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle...."(Psalm 144:1). Twenty years ago, when I was serving the church in Haifa, a church member told me about a conversation he overheard between two Israeli women. One was asking the other why she had not seen her for quite sometime. She replied, "I gave birth to a soldier". This woman was so proud to have given birth to a son who will grow up to be a soldier. Sadly, we still live in such a mentality of war.

All of us constantly observe the birth of innocent children who grow up to become dictators, war criminals, or presidents and prime ministers who spend huge budgets on the production, purchase,

and accumulation of arms, and who teach and practice war. We daily witness the presence of young Israeli soldiers oppressing the Palestinian people. They, like many others, have been trained in the skills of war.

At this Christmas season, as our thoughts turn to the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem where Jesus was born, Bethlehem is practically a closed military area. In spite of the Israeli army assurances that Bethlehem will be opened for Christmas, the facts on the ground reveal the opposite. The Palestinians, except for few hours during the day, are confined to their homes by Israeli military orders. Everything around and inside Bethlehem connotes violence and injustice against Palestinians. The young soldiers are in their tanks and armored cars patrolling, oppressing, and dehumanizing others and in the process being themselves dehumanized. All of this is totally foreign to the spirit of Christmas; and is a basic contradiction with the beauty and innocence of the birth of any child let alone the birth of Jesus Christ “the prince of peace”.

The evangelists writing the biography of Jesus from the vantage point of his death and resurrection could say that his birth, in actual fact, fulfilled the prophecy or dream of Isaiah in a more perfect way (Matthew 1:21; 4:14-16). Jesus’ coming into the world was the nonviolent coming of God. For the first time, a child grows up and walks the way of love and nonviolence; and although he suffers at the hands of violent people, he keeps pointing clearly to the possibility and viability of a life of peace and love.

Indeed, the truest expression of our humanity is found in children, in the birth of every boy or girl. To stay in touch with our humanity and hold on to it we must look at young children. Before they begin to learn, or more correctly, before we begin to teach them racial discrimination, prejudice, hate, violence, or the ugly art of war, they reflect our truest nature. The difference that Jesus Christ has brought through his birth is precisely the fact that he did not lose the essence of his true humanity. In order to hold on to our humanity, we must not walk the way of this world, the way of empire, the way of violence but to follow the way of Jesus Christ, the way of fidelity to God through the path of nonviolence and peace.

It is also possible whether we are Christians or not, to learn from children. Jesus recognized this when he said, “...unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”(Matthew 18:3). Jesus made children a model of the kingdom “...Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). Unless we become like them in simplicity, humility, ability to forgive and trust, we cannot be members of God’s kingdom. This is the nature of God’s kingdom. The children become our model. We must mirror them.

For the sake of children, we must change. The greatest tragedy of our every day life in Israel/Palestine today happens whenever a child is killed, whether Palestinian or Israeli. Every time we kill a child, we murder the truest expression of our humanity. And the more we get used to killing children, the more savage and brutal we become against each other. This is the worst of crimes because gradually and inevitably we lose our own humanity. Every time the crime is repeated, it points to the malady of our world.

Jesus has pointed out the way of nonviolence. Dare we follow it? At this Christmas, in the midst of

the violence of the occupation and the violence of the resistance to it and the cycle of violence that continues to escalate, we are reminded again of the nonviolent coming of God in Jesus Christ. Dare we follow the way?

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...and there shall be endless peace...with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore....”(Is. 9:6-7).

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