

Occupation is Oppression

Excerpts from keynote address by Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the Conference on Ending the Occupation. The conference was co-sponsored by Sabeel, a Palestinian ecumenical liberation center in Jerusalem, and by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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Thank you for how you cared for us in South Africa during the apartheid regime. You showed so much solidarity with us, supporting us and supporting sanctions against the regime. You know we are free in South Africa because of people like yourselves [addressing the audience], people who cared. You cared even when it looked totally impossible. So I want to thank you for that, and for being here.

God is weeping over what He sees in Middle East. God has no one except ourselves, absolutely no one. God is omnipotent, all-powerful, but also impotent. God does not dispatch lightning bolts to remove tyrants, as we might have hoped he would. God waits for you for you to act. You are his Partner. God is as weak as the weakest of his partners, or as strong as the as the morally strongest.

The title of my topic is "Occupation is Oppression." I would like to change that to "Give Peace a Chance; for Peace is Possible" for we are bearers of hope. God's people, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, we want to say our hearts go out to all who have suffered; violence of suicide bombers and of military incursions. I want to say to all, peace is possible. These two people's are God's chosen and beloved, with a common ancestor in Abraham. I give thanks for what the Jews have given us. During Apartheid we told our people God has heard their crying. And God will deliver us as God delivered Israel from bondage. God intervened (stories from Old Testament); this God never abandoned us through tribulation and suffering.

Comparison: Apartheid to Occupation

In our struggle against Apartheid, the great supporters were the Jews. Jews almost instinctively had to be on the side of the disenfranchised, of the voiceless ones, fighting injustice, oppression and evil. I have continued to feel strongly with the Jews. I am patron of holocaust center in South Africa. I believe Israel has right to secure borders. What is not so understandable, not justified, is what it did to another people to guarantee its existence. I've been very deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy land; it reminded me so much of what happened to us blacks in SA. I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at checkpoints and roadblocks suffer like us when young white police officers prevented us from moving about. They seemed to derive so much joy from our humiliation.

Collective punishment. We know of the horrific attacks on refugee camps, towns, villages, and Palestinian institutions. We don't know the exact truth because Israelis won't let the media in. What are they hiding? Perhaps more sinister, why is there no outcry in this country about the Israeli siege in the West Bank. You do see the harrowing images of what suicide bombers have done, something we all condemn, but we see no scenes of what the tanks are doing to Palestinian homes and people.

On one of my visits to the Holy Land I drove to a church with the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. I could hear tears in his voice as he pointed to Jewish settlements. I thought of the desire of Israelis for security. But what of the Palestinians who have lost their land and homes.

Desperation. I have experienced Palestinians pointing to what were their homes, now occupied by Israeli Jews. I was walking with Canon Naim Ateek (Head of Sabeel). In Jerusalem as he pointed in a direction and said "Our home was over there." We were driven out of our home; now occupied by Israeli Jews. My heart aches. I say why are our memories so short. Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, home demolitions, and their own history so soon. Have they turned their backs on their profound and noble religious traditions. Have they forgotten that God cares deeply about the downtrodden. Israel will never get true security and safety through oppressing another people. A true peace can ultimately be built only on justice. We condemn the violence of suicide bombers, and we condemn the corruption of young minds taught hatred, but we also condemn the violence of military incursions in the occupied lands and the inhumanity that won't let ambulances reach the injured.

The military action of recent days, I predict with certainty, will not provide the security and peace Israelis want; it will only intensify the hatred. Israel has three options: revert to the previous stalemated situation; exterminate all Palestinians; or, and I hope this will be the road taken, to strive for peace based on justice, based on withdrawal from all the occupied territories, and the establishment of a viable Palestinian State on those territories side by side, both with secure borders.

We in South Africa had a relatively peaceful transition. If our madness could end as it did, it must be possible to do the same everywhere else in the world. South Africa is a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. If peace could come to South Africa, surely it can come to the Holy Land. My brother Naim Ateek has said what we used to say. "I am not pro- this or that, I am pro-justice, pro-freedom, I am anti-injustice, anti-oppression."

But you know as well as I do that somehow the Israeli government is placed on a pedestal, and to criticize it is immediately dubbed anti-Semitic as if they Palestinians were not Semitic. I am not even anti-white despite the madness of that group. And how did it come about that Israel was collaborating with the Apartheid government on security measures?

People are scared in this country [USA], to say wrong is wrong because the Jewish lobby is powerful, very powerful. Well, so what? This is God's world. For goodness sake, this is God's world. We live in a moral universe. The Apartheid government was very powerful, but today it no longer exists. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pinochet, Milosovik, and Idi Amin were all powerful, but in the end, they bit the dust.

Injustice and oppression will never prevail. Those who are powerful have to remember the litmus test that God gives to the powerful. What is your treatment of the poor, the hungry? the voiceless? And on the basis of that, God passes God's judgment. We should put out a clarion call to the government of the people of Israel, to the Palestinian people and say: peace is possible, peace based on justice is possible, and we are meeting today, and we will continue. And we will do all we can to assist you to achieve this peace, because it is God's dream and you will be able to live amicably together as sisters and brothers.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a 1984 Nobel Prize Laureate, Former General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Leader of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission 96-98.